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Lifting as We Climb: African American Women's Education Experiences  
in the Ivory Tower

By

Bonnie Lynn Reddick

A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Claremont Graduate University and San Diego  
State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Doctor of  
Philosophy in Education

Claremont and San Diego, California

2011

Approved by the Dissertation Chairs

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We, the undersigned, certify that we have read this dissertation of Bonnie Lynn Reddick and approve it as adequate in scope and quality for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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## Abstract of the Dissertation

### Lifting as We Climb: African American Women's Education Experiences

#### in the Ivory Tower

By

Bonnie Lynn Reddick

This study uses mixed methods to examine the experiences of African American women in doctoral programs. 102 African American women completed an on-line survey, and twenty women participated in one-on-one interviews. As an African American female, the researcher is interested in comparing the experiences of African American women: critiquing, analyzing and interpreting similarities and points of divergence in their experiences, and articulating stories of triumph and struggle, using a narrative style. This study confirms that Black women have experienced success in doctoral programs. Some of the participants had meaningful and supportive mentors. They have had limited exposure to Black faculty and/or scholarship. The participants in this study illuminate the dynamics inherent in their relationships with their dissertation committee members, particularly the chairs of their respective committees. In addition, this study explores the discordant relationship between Black female graduate students and Black female dissertation committee members. A majority of the participants were unfamiliar with the term Afrocentricity. They did not fathom that Afrocentricity could be used as a methodological or theoretical framework. All the participants exhibited at least one tenet of Afrocentricity. They are testimonies of the veracity of the Sankofian principles of looking back, reclaiming, and retelling their collective stories. These stories serve as inspiration for some and models of commitment for others.

## **Dedication**

This long journey is dedicated to my family: my mother, Emily Armstrong Jenkins who left me her wit and curiosity; Christopher Reddick, my wonderful soul-mate husband who left this earth much too soon, but is single-handedly responsible for me completing my undergraduate degree; my children: Allan and Phylicia Reddick, each who have inspired and motivated me. I love you both more than you will ever know; my siblings: Howard, Jimmy, Penny, Ronnie and especially, my little sister, Dee, who watched my kids so I could attend night classes; my Dad, Howard Hooker, who demanded academic excellence from me at a young age; to my grandchildren: Aaliyah Unique, Aaniyah Lynn and Aamiyah Lachelle, I love you all. I hope this momentous accomplishment will inspire each of you to follow in my footsteps. To my nieces, nephews and friends, too numerous to name, thank you for your support and encouraging words. To my Fulfillment Worship Center family, particularly my pastor, Vera LaGrone-White, who kept me lifted up in prayer. Dr. Bill Piland who encouraged me to pursue my passion—teaching; and Dr. Shirley Nash Weber who is a friend and colleague, thank you for your wisdom, your critiques, your gentle cajoling and counseling; thank you for feeding me and reminding me not to save the world, but to get it done!; thank you to Dr. Diane Yerkes who read and critiqued numerous drafts; Dr. Patricia Geist-Martin, Dr. Carolyn Ellis and Dr. Lourdes Arguelles who taught me about ethnography, autoethnography and narrative; to the 102 women who responded to my survey and the nineteen women who shared their experiences with me, thank you! God Bless all of you! A special thank you is reserved for my Best Friend for Lyfe, Theodosia Ballard, my writing partner and cheerleader. You are insightful and you ask the hard questions.

I could have never finished this journey without you. Finally, and certainly not least, I honor, worship and adore my Creator, who makes all things possible!

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## **Chapter 1: Statement of the Problem**

The response to African Americans' racialized presence in the hallowed halls of academia is often fraught with isolation and invisibility (McKay, 1997). Mary Jane Patterson earned her B.A. in 1862, and Jane McAllister earned her Ph.D. in 1927. Evans (2007) writes that Patterson received substantial family support, but little is written about her personal experiences in the classroom or her interpersonal relationships with her cohorts or faculty (Williams-Burns, 1982). Williams-Burns (1982) writes, "Although Columbia was not without its anti-Black sentiment among faculty, McAllister won the respect of a number of professors" (p. 346).

Additionally, Evans (2007) notes, "life was not easy for black students; [...] isolation was a significant part of the student experience" (p. 25) because of the lack of a critical mass. The fact that some Blacks chose to leave this country to study in Europe is documented (Cooper, 1988) and may provide some insight into the enigma of the Black female experience in America's institutions of higher learning at the dawn of the twentieth century. As this country struggled to accommodate the Africanist presence, this nation's educational institutions struggled, as well.

There are a number of empirical studies on the educational experiences of Black women in doctoral programs. Few qualitative studies have been conducted on the educational experiences of early Black female pioneers who had commenced their post secondary education in the beginning of the twentieth century (Evans 2007; Perkins, 2009). Jane McAllister, for example, who is often credited as being the first African American female to earn a Ph.D. in Education, wrote her dissertation on the teaching pedagogy of Black educators (Smith-Crocco & Waite, 2007). In the 1940s and 1950s, the dissertations of Bolton, Cuthbert, and Noble provided a glimpse of the social dynamics of doctoral study and Black female students (Smith-Crocco &



Waite, 2007). Green and Scott (2003) articulate the Black female's experience; however, they do not provide a lot of detail about the classroom dynamics experienced by their subjects. While much is still unknown about the experiences of Black students, especially females in doctoral programs, it is important to study and describe the Black females' experience, so that their stories of triumph and challenge can be critiqued and their successes replicated in the future. In addition, the challenges need to be examined so that future doctoral students are better informed about the potential challenges.

African American female education pioneers had a communal national discourse that obligated them to racial uplift (Collins, 2001; Perkins, 1983; Randolph, 2001). Church Terrell implored Black people "to go into our communities and improve them [...] and go into our nation and change it" (Church Terrell, cited in Smith Crocco & Waite, 2007 p. 43; Thomas, 2001; Watts, 2003). Their vision mirrored and complimented that of African American male leaders of the time which essentially postulated that African American scholars should articulate scholarship and theories that espouse the veracity of African Americans' intellectual and social prowess to the dominate culture in hopes of opening doors of opportunities to the majority of Blacks who were disproportionately oppressed, subjugated and excluded (Cooper, 1988; Stewart, 2004).

The rhetoric about racial matters has shifted (Giddings, 2006; McClelland, 1990). Before the Civil Rights Movement, the Africanist presence in white academia was essentially ignored (McClelland, 1990). Blacks were reluctantly admitted. The national dialogic response at the dawn of the twentieth century, however, was to prove they belonged there (DuBois, 1903; Evans, 2007). The dominant culture oftentimes did not respect or acknowledge their presence and other

social institutions reified white hegemony and privilege (Asante, 2003; Benjamin, 1997; Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Foster, 1999; Leonardo, 2005; Wing Sue, 2003).

Black people, with a few exceptions, have always rejected the notion of being inherently inferior, and the majority of them have consistently and vigilantly advocated for America to adhere to its democratic ideals and promises (Douglass, 2004; DuBois, 1903; Fries-Britt & Turner-Kelly, 2005; Woodson, 1933). Black people continue to seek ways to experience the democratic ideals and promises offered by the principles for which this country was founded: life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Forty years ago, Black students stopped asking for a democratic response; they demanded it. Black students demanded that Black Studies be an integral component of the academic curriculum. As a result, universities developed Black Studies Departments across the nation and universities adopted programs to increase the number of students of color (Asante, 2002; Karenga, 2002; Van DeBurg, 1997). Other social institutions adopted affirmative action policies and goals. After President Reagan systematically dismantled Affirmative Action in the early 1990s (Darling-Hammond, Williamson, & Hyler, 2007; Siwatu, 2001; Thompson, 1999), the response to the Africanist presence shifted from a reluctant acceptance to an unfavorable, often covert, reaction (Tatum, 2007; West, 2003). The climate of university campuses was not very inviting. That is not to say that some Black scholars have not done well; many have. Their journey, in many cases, was not easy and, in some instances, it was unnecessarily arduous and painful (Blue, 2001; Carter, 2001; Collins, 2001).

Michael Eric Dyson (2004) asserts that after the Civil Rights Movement, the most vitriolic expressions of racism were forced underground; however, “the symptoms of racial antipathy persisted; they are harder to prove and more difficult to analyze” (p. 215). This nation

has embraced and proffered what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2003) has termed “color blind racism.” He suggests that after the 1960s, most Whites embraced an ideology that asserts that color does not exist, while supporting and enjoying benefits bequeathed to them because of their whiteness. Bonilla-Silva (2003) postulates, “racial considerations shade almost everything in America” (p. 1). Most Americans relate racism to acts of cruelty and violence (Wing Sue, 2003). They liken it to the menacing dogs attacking young, civil rights protesters or billy club wielding police officers who landed repeated, vicious, hits, on a black person’s head and/or body. The demographics of this country are changing. The national answer to traditional, institutional, reactions to race must change as well. Colleges of Education must be at the forefront of identifying and mediating academic and social issues that impede progress of students to perform well and be successful.

In the field of education, specifically, it is important to critique the Africanist female presence in academe because a majority of Ph.D.s earned by Black women is awarded in education (Foster, 1997; McKay, 1997; Randolph, 2001; Smith-Crocco & Waite, 2007). Faculty in Colleges of Education is responsible for training prospective teachers, and it is they who can make a difference in the education of Black children. King (2005) has argued that Black scholars need to be at the forefront of research about Black people (Green & Scott, 2003). That includes teachers and students, and where better than in schools of education?

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to examine the social and educational experiences of African American women in doctoral programs across the disciplines in the last decade. It is important to understand the schooling experiences of African American females in order to identify environmental factors that might be mediated to ensure their success (King & Chepyator-Thomson, 1996). In addition, as Louque (1999) asserts, research about African Americans’

educational experiences has focused on the “barriers and challenges rather than the stories of successful students” (p. 198). In other words, African American women’s experiences are critiqued through a deficit model (Foster, 1999; Howard-Vital, 1989; Ladson-Billings, 2005a; 2005b). Black women certainly encounter challenges, but the story is not only how they conquered those challenges and were not subsumed by them, (Collins, 2001; Fries-Britt & Turner-Kelly, 2005; Giddings, 2006; Hinton-Johnson, 2003; Murray, 2006; Peters, 2003 but rather how they manifested resilience, perseverance, and a steadfast tenacity in the face of adversity.

### **Research Questions**

This research study was guided by three questions:

1. What are the educational experiences of African American women in doctoral programs across the disciplines?
2. What strategies do African American women utilize to be successful in doctoral programs across the disciplines?
3. Do Afrocentric sensibilities impact African American female doctoral students as they complete their graduate work? And if so, how?

In regards to the final research question, the researcher seeks to examine how one’s Afrocentric sensibilities impact the doctoral experience. “Afrocentricity is the conscious process by which a person locates African phenomena within an African subject content or agency or action” (Asante, 2002, p. 97). Scholars who embrace the tenets of Afrocentricity also embrace the “right and the responsibility to describe reality from their own perspective” (Reviere, 2001, p. 711). Asante asserts that scholars must embrace three basic Afrocentric beliefs: 1) They must uncover the hidden, subtle, and racist theories embedded in current methodologies; 2) They must work to “legitimize the centrality of African ideals and values as a valid frame of reference for

acquiring and examining data”; and 3) They must “maintain inquiry rooted in a strict interpretation of place” (Reviere, 2001, p. 712). An Afrocentric belief also requires the individual to understand, recognize, acknowledge and maintain community, so it encourages a pursuit of communal uplift (Reviere, 2001).

When the work of Black scholars is used sparingly in doctoral classes (Duckworth-Warner, 2003), or professors embrace the tenets of presumably racist beliefs, such as the Bell Curve or Patrick Moynihan’s emasculating Black matriarch theory (Carter, 2008; Obidah, 2001), does a woman with Afrocentric sensibilities respond differently from a Black woman who does not embody those qualities? When Black women are overtly disrespected with condescending rhetoric or simply ignored in class (Blue, 2001; Green & Scott, 2003; Hinton-Johnson, 2003; Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Liddell, 2006; Woods, 2001), by faculty and classmates, does an Afrocentric woman possess the tools needed to resist being subsumed by white hegemony and privilege reified in her doctoral program?

As Feagin and Sikes (1995) suggest, scholars must go beyond the empirical data and look at qualitative studies that explore African American women’s learning experiences. Qualitative studies utilize interviews, observation, and records that are guided by a research design. Coding procedures are used to analyze the data, and the findings are presented in a written or oral report (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Evocative and honest reflections of classroom dynamics may help scholars and graduate students critique and improve doctoral programs.

### **Significance**

This research is significant for a number of reasons: 1) There is a paucity of contemporary qualitative studies that examine the African American female’s experiences in the ivory tower, using her own voice (Benjamin, 1997; Collins, 2001; Gray-White, 2008; Hinton-Johnson, 2003; Liddell, 2006; Mason, 2006; Perkins, 2009; Schwartz, Bower, Rice &

Washington, 2003; Wadpole, 2007; and 2) Memorializing the participants' experiences, using a narrative style, provides a way to capture, analyze, and interpret the complexity of the convergence of race and gender in academia. 3) Few qualitative studies specifically examine the impact reifying White hegemony has on the educational experiences of Black women. 4) Using an Afrocentric theoretical framework and as a methodological tool will add to the body of literature and offer tools for Black women in the pipeline to use to successfully complete their graduate programs. More importantly, the participants can provide insight, encouragement, and hope for those presently in doctoral programs and those seeking admittance into doctoral programs. An exploration of how an African American woman, who embodies Afrocentric sensibilities, experiences academia differently from those who are not similarly embodied, will augment a deficiency in the body of knowledge about Black women's educational experiences.

African American women must successfully earn the terminal degree, so they can be in place to fill the void in higher education resulting from attrition in the next few years. Hawley (1993) postulates that in the next ten years, "two out of three faculty members will reach retirement age, virtually the entire professoriate will have to be replaced" (p. 8). The introduction of new faculty is a perfect opportunity to mediate the paucity of African American faculty (Howard-Vital, 1989; Thompson & Louque, 2005; Williams, 2001).

This study utilized a mix-method research design. Participants completed a 32-item on-line survey, consisting of yes/no, multiple choice and open-ended questions. 102 respondents participated in the on-line survey. Sixty-five of them indicated that they would participate in a one-on-one interview. Based upon the survey responses, participants were placed in categories for additional analysis. The grouping process and collateral results are discussed in further detail in Chapter Three.

Participants were purposefully selected to participate in the one-on-one interviews. Purposeful sampling, which selects participants based upon specific criteria, was used to identify common patterns in the participants' experiences (Higginbottom, 2004).

### **Summary**

Afrocentric sensibilities obligate Black people to return to their African past and reclaim it. More importantly, it requires them to articulate their stories in response to traditional, reifying, white hegemonic ways of knowing (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Watts, 2003), to encourage and support other African American women, and to offer a counternarrative to university faculty and students. There is value in learning from the schooling experiences of African American females in the academy.

An examination of the Black female presence can be instructive because it illuminates the convergence of race and sex (Guy-Sheftall, 1995; Mabokela & Green, 2001). An examination of the historical presence of Black women who have successfully negotiated the academy exemplifies an experience fraught with anger and pain, but one also filled with triumph and victory (Allen, 1992; Generett & Jeffries, 2003; Green & Scott, 2003; Liddell, 2006; Mabokela & Green, 2001; Mason, 2006; Patterson, 2006; Schwartz et al., 2003). Such an examination can offer knowledge and support to future generations as well as potentially making an impact on graduate programs at large in education in transformative ways.

## **Chapter Two: Review of the Literature**

The National Center for Education Statistics (U.S. Department of Education, 2009) reports that Black women earned 57% of doctoral degrees earned by Black students in 1996-97. Ten years later, that number increased to 66% (Garibaldi, 1997; Groen & Rizzo, 2004; Lewis, 2007; US Department of Education, 2009; Thomas & Jackson, 2007). In 2006-07, a doctoral degree in education was the most conferred degree in higher education (US Department of Education, 2009). Black women have had a presence in the academy and, their numbers have continued to increase in the last 10 years. Most of them are earning their terminal degrees in education.

Significant research studies exploring the experiences of African American women in doctoral programs are important to the academy because university faculty and students are missing out on opportunities to truly embrace and experience diversity. It is more than mere numbers. While the research confirms that there are more Black women than Black men enrolled in college (Collins, 2001; Groen & Rizzo, 2004; Schwartz et al., 2003; Thompson, 1999), the question that this researcher asks is: what happens to Black women once they get there?

African American women need to write about their lived experiences and the lives of other African American women. Too often, researchers who do not look like them, and, who do not share their cultural values and experiences, articulate their experiences (Blue, 2001; Mabokela & Green, 2001; Williams, 2001). The researchers make choices about what and how much to share. Frequently, they miss the nuances of the verbal exchange, or a look or gesture that denotes meaning. They contribute to African American women's voices being muted, silenced, or ignored (Alfred, 2001; Mabokela & Green, 2001). Many well known White scholars



have built their academic careers publishing and presenting their research about African Americans' educational experiences (Howard, 1999; Kozol, 1991; McIntosh, 1986; Picower, 2004; Wise, 2005). For a young Black scholar to have to justify her worth everyday can sometimes be exhausting (Franklin, 1989; Mabokela & Green, 2001); however, the Africanist presence is important because African American women must create the space to transform and challenge misconceptions about African American women in higher education by using their scholarly voices to illuminate the experiences of African American women in graduate programs (Carter, 2001; Evans, 2007; Farmer, 1993; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2005; Gray-White, 2008; Harley & Terborg-Penn, 1978; Howard-Vital, 1989; Mabokela & Green, 2001; Tate, 1997).

Numerous studies (Carter, 2001; Evans, 2007; Feagin & Sikes, 1995; Garret, 2006; Gray-White, 2008; Harley & Terborg-Penn, 1978; Howard-Vital, 1989; Liddell, 2007; Louque, 1999; Mabokela & Green, 2001; Mason, 2006; Perkins, 1997; Smith-Crocco & Waite, 2007; Tate, 1997; Waite, 2001) detail how some Black women have been ostracized, humiliated and isolated during their pursuit of a doctorate. For example, in Patterson's (2006) study of Black women in doctoral programs and their understanding of double consciousness, one of his participants, described how she worked with her cohorts on a class assignment, giving them most of the answers; however, when their papers were graded and returned, she received the lowest score.

She shared:

I understood a lot more that they did and I actually ended up giving them some of the answers. Our papers were almost identical and in the end both of them ended up with perfect scores. I challenged my grade and he suggested that I look to other classmates for help with understanding. I was so hurt because I was the one who helped them (Mason, 2006, p. 90).

Another participant in Patterson's (2006) dissertation shared:

I have always sought out options that allowed me to make my own way...I find a window as opposed to coming through the front door. As a Black woman, I would say that I am still doing that...And it's painful that you must do that by understanding that society is created for white people and you are a guest in it, helps for comprehension of your experience. It doesn't help ease the pain; it helps you understand why it's painful (p. 87).

Moreover, Feagin and Sikes (1995) suggest:

Life for Black students in mostly White schools often means daily struggle and recurring crises. They struggle to find out what the rules of the game are, officially and unofficially. When Black students say "Whiteness" is an omnipresent problem, they are not talking about color or racial identification. They are reporting being at sea in a hostile environment (p. 97).

Contemporaneous experiences articulate a narrative of pain, exclusion, and frustration, which may be primarily attributed to the participants not knowing the hidden curriculum of academia, coupled with the post-racial environment. These narratives further support the researcher's interest in gleaning the educational experiences of, and strategies used by Black women to be successful in doctoral programs within the last decade.

This literature review is organized as follows: First, a brief historical overview of the first three African American women to earn a terminal degree is highlighted. Because the majority of doctorate degrees conferred to Black women are in education, the researcher offers a brief précis on the experience of Jane McAllister, the first African American woman to earn a doctorate degree in Education. The researcher explores the experiences of three African American women

whose dissertation topics explored the experiences of Black women at white universities. Second, there is a brief discussion of why individuals pursue the terminal degree, including the social trends that resonate from the literature. Third, the primary issues for African American women in higher education are discussed. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the theoretical framework that frames this research.

### **Historical Overview**

Perkins (1983) in “The Impact of the ‘Cult of True Womanhood’ on the Education of Black Women,” provides a succinct historical perspective of the educational experiences of women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. She writes that some White women went to college to prepare for marriage. In other words, they were directed to courses designed to encourage domesticity and servility. White women, for the most part, were happy with merely having a physical presence at the university; most did not develop an interest in intellectual curiosity. Black women, on the other hand, were masters of domesticity and servility because of their experiences before and after slavery. More importantly, however, Black women understood and embraced their obligation to be champions of racial uplift (Perkins, 1983).

Mary Jane Patterson was the first African American female to earn a bachelor’s degree (Collins, 2001; Fletcher, 1943). Fletcher’s (1943) *A History of Oberlin College: From its Foundation Through the Civil War, Volume II*, however, did not explain Ms. Patterson’s academic interest or the racial climate of the campus when she attended. Ms. Patterson is included in an inventory of students’ names. The volume confirms that she attended Oberlin from 1857-1862. She graduated in 1862 (Fletcher, 1943). According to Fletcher, Oberlin began admitting colored students in 1835. After graduating, Patterson taught in Philadelphia and Washington D.C. Fletcher speculates that Patterson’s parents were fugitive slaves.

Although Fletcher's work does not detail the experiences of Patterson specifically, Bigglestone (1971) offers an insightful treatise on the experiences of Black students at Oberlin from 1865-1940. Oberlin, as Bigglestone describes, was very involved in the anti-slavery movement, admitted Black students in 1935, two years after it was founded. Oberlin, however, experienced difficulty in ameliorating discriminatory practices after slavery ended. Bigglestone states, "black students were treated differently from white students at Oberlin College during the period between the end of the Civil War and the beginning of World War II" (p. 198). Black students were isolated to their own table in the dining hall because White students refused to eat at the same table as Blacks. White students prohibited Black membership in honor societies. President King asked Blacks not to "press for social equality" (p. 206) but to acquiesce to separate and unequal schools.

The first American Ph.D. was awarded in 1861. The first African American man to be awarded a Ph.D. was Edward Bouchet in 1876 (Evans, 2007). In 1921, the first three African American women to earn a Ph.D. were Eva Dykes, Georgina Simpson and Sadie Mossell Alexander (Evans, 2007; Perkins, 2009). They earned doctorates in various fields, including English philology, German, and Economics (Evans, 2007; Perkins, 2009). *The Black Women Oral History Project, Volume 2* (Hill, 1991a) includes the experiences of Alexander and Dykes. Alexander, in addition to being one of the first African American women to earn a terminal degree, also earned a law degree and was "the first Black woman to be admitted to practice in Pennsylvania" (p. 71). Alexander does not detail her schooling experiences in graduate school except to say, "I remember the day I got my Ph.D. That was a great event. Because while the two other women that year got their degrees, mine came first, and I got all the publicity" (p. 84). Dykes provides very little information regarding her educational experiences in graduate school.

Like Alexander, she illuminates the historical significance of being one of the first Black women to earn a Ph.D. She relates that she completed the degree in 3-4 years. While there is much speculation as to which of the three women actually received the degree first, it is clear that Dykes was “the first one to get the Ph.D. degree in English”, and the “first woman, then, of our race to finish with a Ph.D. from Radcliffe” (Hill, 1991b, p. 201).

The majority of Black women earned a terminal degree in Education. In the 1920s, three Black women earned doctorates in education. Jennie Porter received her degree from the University of Cincinnati in 1928, Aletha Washington from Ohio State in 1928, and Jane McAllister from Teachers College, Columbia University in 1929 (Smith-Crocco & Waite, 2007). There is a stark paucity of research on Porter and Washington’s research interests and academic pursuits after earning the advanced degree. The literature confirms, however, that McAllister’s dissertation was entitled “The Training of Negro Teachers in Louisiana” (Williams-Burns, 1982). Although few primary sources are available that articulate early female education pioneers’ experiences, there are critiques of this historical period (Evans, 2007). Weiler (2005) writes an insightful essay on Mabel Carney, who was, as Weiler described her, a “White Ally” (p. 2599) who taught at the Teacher’s College, when McAllister was in the doctoral program. Weiler purports that there were three reasons for the increase in African American enrollment at Columbia in the 1920s: Southern Blacks were excluded from graduate study in Southern colleges and were provided stipends to attend Northern colleges; Teacher’s College offered great opportunities to Black students; and Columbia was located close to Harlem. Harlem, like other Northern cities, had experienced an influx of migration of Southern Blacks to the North. In addition, Harlem was experiencing a rebirth in the Black arts, including, literature, paintings, sculpture and intellectual thought. This period is often called the Harlem Renaissance.

Weiler goes further to describe Carney's support of African and African American students and their education. Initially, Carney's perspective could be described as maternalistic, but as she traveled to Southern Black schools and began partnering with leading Black intellectuals, her ideas about race and racism evolved. In addition, Weiler surmised the Communist Party had a distinct presence in New York. Its presence propelled Columbia to deal with the race issue. The Communist Party offered a scathing indictment about racial matters on Columbia's campus, including segregated housing and the superficial manner in which the college dealt with race and racism.

Evans (2007) recounts the experiences of six Black female education pioneers. She concludes that most of the women experienced isolation, "even if the environment was not overtly hostile" (p. 102). DuBois (1932) and Payne (1938) each conducted empirical studies of Blacks in American colleges. DuBois, who edited the *Crisis Magazine*, included an annual report of Blacks in Education. These empirical studies, however, typically illuminated the accomplishments of Black students who earned undergraduate and masters degrees. In fact, DuBois asserts that the data is incomplete and inaccurate because of the practice of White "universities not keeping enrollment statistics by race or color" (1938, p. 258). This omission would explain why DuBois, at times, does not make gender distinctions in the annual reports.

Payne (1938) conducted a comprehensive study on Blacks in college. Most of the data does not segregate the data by gender. The data that is distinguished by gender purports the social composition of Black college graduates. Payne asked questions to glean the marital status of graduates, whether they had children and if they returned to their home state after they earned the degree.

The 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision, which overturned the separate but equal doctrine, ostensibly opened the proverbial window of opportunity for Blacks in higher education. Colleges and universities across the country experienced an influx of Blacks because of World War II veterans using the G.I. Bill (Smith-Crocco & Waite, 2007). What is interesting about this period is the inevitable convergence of civil rights with women's rights. This convergence is evident in the dissertation topics of three Black women in the 1940s and 1950s: Marion V. Cuthbert, Ina Bolton and Jeanne L. Noble (Smith-Crocco & Waite, 2007). These women illuminate two interesting issues at the university: 1) the role of the researcher, and 2) the question of whether the universities were meeting the needs of Black women. Their research also supports an unstated, interminably present, hypothesis that critiques Black women's triple burden of being Black, female, and educated. When weighed against the hostile environment Blacks may have experienced in the ivory tower, combined with the university's resistance to research that embraced researcher subjectivity, these women courageously wrote about Black women's educational experiences at the university anyway.

Cuthbert, Bolton, and Noble each explored Black women's insights into how they were treated at the university. Cuthbert's study is unique in that she explores her participants' perceptions of how other Blacks treated them (Evans, 2007; Smith-Crocco & Waite, 2007). She concluded that the participants felt other Blacks thought they were "snobbish" or "selfish" (p. 79). Additionally, Cuthbert looked at Black women's motivation to go to college and found that they were motivated by a desire for future stability and status, not racial uplift as was evidenced by the women 20 years prior.

Bolton and Noble (Smith-Crocco & Waite, 2007) also examined how the university treated Black women and each concluded that there was a lack of faculty interaction with the

students and a lack of advisors to provide them with support and direction (Smith-Crocco & Waite, 2007). Again, their research did not suggest that Black women were interested in racial uplift. In fact, they uncharacteristically exhibited individual self-interest, much as the dominant culture did. This is a pivotal point because these women were attending predominately White universities in the North. Southern universities would not admit them and historically Black universities did not offer doctorates at the time (Smith-Crocco & Waite, 2007). In addition, they were trying to simultaneously mediate racism, sexism, and success.

The majority of Black female students entered the field of education in the first half of the twentieth century (Foster, 1997; McKay, 1997; Randolph, 2001; Smith-Crocco & Waite, 2007) primarily because racism and sexism precluded their entrance into other fields. In addition, some of them did not have the prerequisites to enter the field. The numbers confirm that Black women were earning the degrees; however, numbers cannot articulate the psychological difficulties associated with that achievement (Feagin & Sikes, 1995).

### **Double Consciousness**

Two social trends emerged in this examination of the educational experiences of Black women: double consciousness and the role of the public intellectual. Double consciousness is not new. It is a phenomenon coined by Dr. W.E.B. DuBois in 1903 that purported that some African Americans uniquely and consistently must simultaneously forge two distinct identities: being African and being American.

Since Africans have inhabited the Americas, they have struggled to either assimilate into the mainstream culture or forge their own distinct and separate identity within that culture. At the turn of the twentieth century, DuBois (1903) theorized that America's dilemma in the new century would be that of the color line. He asked what many African Americans felt at the time, "How does it feel to be a problem?" (p. 4). And he responded:



It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring souls in one dark body (p. 5).

Black students, as DuBois suggested, had to find ways to reconcile their two-ness, to foster a consciousness (Graham, 2003; Mason, 2006). Friere (1970) asserted that consciousness is “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (p. 35). It may be increasingly difficult for someone who is not conscious to discern the veracity of DuBois’ argument today because many African Americans, as a majority of White Americans, believe that DuBois’ argument died when President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Bill in 1964 (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Leonardo, 2005; McClellan, 1990; Wing Sue, 2003).

### **The Role of the Public Intellectual**

Another characteristic of the Black scholar is the role of the public intellectual. In the Black community, most Black academicians are perceived as public intellectuals who are essentially responsible for articulating the African American experience (Dyson, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2005a). Dyson (2004) admonished Black intellectuals to “discover, uncover, and recover truth [. . .] and to subject our efforts to healthy debate and examination” (p. xxi). Public intellectuals must be prepared and equipped to 1) have a vision of what that “truth” looks like and 2) know that these discoveries will be met with resistance on all fronts (Ladson-Billings, 2005b). Hill-Collins (2000) is insightful when she asserts that Black women are the consummate insiders-outsiders. Their intellectual prowess gets Black women inside academia, but their race and gender keep them on the margins (Alfred, 2001).

At the turn of the twentieth century, Black intellectuals felt obligated to proffer arguments that supported the Africanist presence in the hallowed halls of academia (Cooper, 1988; DuBois, 1903; Evans, 2007; Lewis, 1994). In fact, they believed that they had something to prove, and if they could only convince White people that African Americans deserved to be there, they would be all right. For example, during the Harlem Renaissance, the older, more mature, public intelligentsia, such as DuBois, Johnson, and others, believed that Black intellectuals had an obligation to represent the very best of the race (Lewis, 1994). In other words, they objected to the artists giving voice to the lives of everyday people. They discouraged a critical examination of the devastating impact of racism on the lives of common people (Lewis, 1994). The younger intelligentsia, Langston Hughes, specifically, objected to the old vanguards' high brow philosophy whose primary objective was to produce material that would be acceptable and palatable to Whites. In 1926, Hughes wrote:

We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful, And ugly too... We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves (p. 95).

Just as Black public intellectuals experienced tension during the Harlem Renaissance resulting from what information they should share with mainstream America, contemporary intellectuals, might do well to take Hughes' lead and "express ourselves without fear and shame" (Hughes, 1926, p. 95).

In 1893, feminist, scholar, Anna Julia Cooper gave voice to the Black woman's experience. Her voice was in direct opposition to the dominant public discourse. In fact, she

challenged patriarchal authority to articulate the Black woman's experience. She wrote, "Only the Black woman can say when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole *Negro race enters with me*" (1988, p. 31). Two hundred years ago, Black women were the "voices at the bottom of the well", shouting up to White men and women and Black men that they did not need any help theorizing their issues (Guy-Sheftall, 1995). Moreover, no one could articulate the confluence of racism and sexism like Black women. Black women, for the most part, have not asked for handouts or concessions (Cooper, 1988; Evans, 2007; Harley & Terborg-Penn, 1978). They understood that the Black woman holds the power of the Black race in her womb; therefore, she will not allow anyone to silence her when it comes to forging a path for the collective future of Black people (Cooper, 1988; Evans, 2007; Harley & Terborg-Penn, 1978; Lorde, 1980).

Just as Cooper (1988) described the importance of Black women creating spaces to articulate their experiences and theorizing on the future possibilities and potential of their race, literary critic and college professor, Mary Helen Washington (1975) asserted that Black female scholars must recover, retrieve, introduce and celebrate Black women writers. She made this assertion in the context of the literary tradition, however, her assessment, has applicability in the educational arena, as well. Over 40 years ago, as a young professor, Washington had not read any works by Black writers. She made it her duty to uncover their works and compile an anthology to share with others.

If education scholars need inspiration or motivation to take up this charge, they need only look to the past. In 1890, while Black men were creating an intellectual think tank to model the intellectual prowess of the race, while specifically excluding women from this elite academy,

Black women undeterred were independently leading the crusade against lynching. They were also interrogating the dominate culture's social construction of "true" womanhood to include the uniqueness of Black women's experiences, and working to build educational institutions for Black students (Washington, 1987). Black women understood that they had to model for the masses the importance of education and work to secure the destiny of Black people. Education had to do more than teach about work. It had to teach about life (Akbar, 1998; Hancock, 2003; Weiler, 2005).

Public intellectuals are needed in the academy to offer a counternarrative to the traditional, iconic, hegemonic construction of African American lives (Carter, 2001; Evans, 2007; Gray-White, 2008). African Americans today need to play an integral role in constructing history that includes the African American experience, told by African Americans (King, 2005; Malveaux, 1996). Over 10 years ago, present Bennett College President, Julianne Malveaux (1996) postulated that conservatives were controlling the intellectual debate about race matters. They had co-opted Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s words and used them out of context, and in a manner he did not intend, when he said "One day we will not be judged by the color of our skin, but the content of our character" (King, 1963, p. 323). Many have misinterpreted King's words to mean he was advocating a color blind society (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). What King was suggesting, however, was he hoped that his kids would not be judged because they were Black; rather they would be judged by their character.

Malveaux (1996) asked, "Where are the historians who will succeed John Hope Franklin...the young people whose research will remind us why 'preference' is an inappropriate way to describe affirmative action?" (p. 44). It would behoove those who are contemplating a

career in academe to consider the consequences of pursuing the doctoral degree and to be certain of one's motives and expectations for the journey.

Thompson (1999), in "What the Numbers Really Mean: African American Underrepresentation at the Doctoral Level," suggested that from the end of slavery until WWII, Blacks earned fewer than 400 doctorates. This was an extraordinary accomplishment in light of the fact that institutional and social barriers were pervasive and prohibited the mere presence of Blacks in academe. In the 1970's, there was an influx of Blacks in institutions of higher learning because of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, as well as the G.I. Bill (Allen, 1992; Evans, 2007; Hinton-Johnson, 2003; Thompson, 1999). In the 1970's, Blacks comprised 11% of the population and represented 5.5% of graduate students (Thompson, 1999). Perkins and Reuben, (2007) asserts that the 1964 Civil Rights Act provided greater scrutiny and repercussion for discrimination. In addition, Congress passed the Higher Education Act which provided for financial aid, including work study and grants. Title III provided greater funding to Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Title IX "banned all educational programs receiving federal funds from discriminating on the base of sex" (p. 273).

In the 1980's, graduate enrollments decreased for most groups. Black enrollment decreased by 20% (Thompson, 1999). Thompson (1999) found that the percentage of doctorates awarded to African Americans in 1995 was exactly the same as those awarded in 1977, and fewer than those awarded in 1981. She concluded that a number of factors contributed to this decline, including "academic preparation, finances and institutional barriers" (p. 28), i.e. access, coupled with President Reagan's lack of support and enforcement of Civil Rights legislation (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Mabokela & Green, 2001). Reagan's policies were complicit in the overt and hostile racial climate on university campuses that communicated to Black students

that they were not welcome, and rigid admissions requirements were used to impede their access. However, between 1990 and 1995, Black women earned over 200 more doctorates than did Black men. They accounted for over 60% of all doctorates awarded to African Americans (Garibaldi, 1997; Lewis, 2007; Thomas & Jackson, 2007).

African American students, who are accepted into doctoral programs, soon discover that they must adopt survival strategies to successfully complete their programs (Cushinberry, 2003; Green & Scott, 2003; Mabokela & Green, 2001; Thompson & Louque, 2005). Four primary issues that resonate in the literature, when examining African American women's experiences in doctoral programs, include 1) the lack of mentors and/or advisors, generally, (Cushinberry, 2003; Duckworth-Warner, 2003; Green & Scott, 2003; Hopp, Mumford, & Williams, 2003; Rentz, 2003); 2) the paucity of African American faculty, specifically, (Carroll, 1982; Collins, 2001; Howard-Vital, 1989; Hinton-Johnson, 2003; Marbley, 2007; McKay, 1997; Rentz, 2003; Thompson & Louque, 2005; Woods, 2001); 3) isolating and non-affirming classroom experiences, (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Graham, 2003; Johnson, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2005b; Peters, 2003) and 4) the conflicting response from the African American community to their academic pursuits (Malveaux, 1996; Patterson, 2006). Once a doctoral student is admitted into the academy, there are a number of issues she might expect to encounter.

### **Primary Issues for African American Women in Higher Education**

**Mentors/Advisors.** Hilliard in *The Maroon Within Us* (1995), told the reader about the role of pedagogy in Ancient Egypt. He asserts that those who had serious educational aspirations --having a desire to acquire a breadth and depth of knowledge-- were astute observers. They were assigned to a master who was charged with designing an apprenticeship experience that was participatory and instructive. It was a partnership. The apprentice was

given various assignments that challenged his intellectual curiosity and moral compass. He was in constant dialogue, critique, and self-reflection with his master teacher.

Green and Scott (2003) confirmed that mentoring is a task that can be traced back to early African ancestral days. A mentor was instrumental in forging spaces of resistance and resilience during slavery. Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, and Sojourner Truth were all mentors who modeled for enslaved Africans the path to freedom. Green and Scott (2003) suggested that Africans being stolen from the western shores of Africa and forced to adopt a culture unfamiliar to them is not unlike African Americans' mentoring experiences in a predominately White institution (PWI).

A mentor serves in the same capacity as a master teacher who designs a program to instruct his/her initiate in everything he or she knows. In doctoral programs some scholars suggest that mentoring graduate students should include: consistent dialogue, direction, and advice on coursework, assistance with qualifying examinations, publishing opportunities, conference attendance and participation, and help with research interests, dissertation topics and timelines (Cushinberry, 2003; Duckworth-Warner, 2003; Hopp et al., 2003; Rentz, 2003).

Duckworth-Warner (2003) suggested that there are three types of mentors: the VIP, the How-to, and the Warm and Fuzzy. The VIP, generally a well-respected senior scholar, provides students with access to the resources: funding, publishing, conferences and people. The How-to Mentor shows students the ropes and articulates the rules of the game. He/she tells students which conferences to attend, which journals to submit proposals to and how to write grants. The Warm and Fuzzy mentor is the cheerleader. He or she provides emotional support. When the students get discouraged and angry or feel isolated, the Warm and Fuzzy mentor encourages, listens, and cajoles.

Others advise that mentors should also apprise his or her protégés of the hidden curriculum (Allen, 1999; Duckworth–Warner, 2003; Hinton-Johnson, 2003) permeating the academy, i.e., those policies, activities, and requirements that cannot be found on the department’s website, professional brochures, or fact sheets. This includes the politics of the department and its personnel.

The literature confirms that few African American doctoral students have mentors, and often those who do, secure mentors outside their respective departments (Garrett, 2006; Hopp et al., 2003; Peters, 2003; Thompson & Louque, 2005). It also illuminates the importance of mentors to the success of African American students. Research has shown that providing mentors is one of the best ways that postsecondary institutions can increase the likelihood that faculty and students of color will view institutions as supportive (Collins, 2001; Hopp et al., 2003; Peters, 2003; Thompson & Louque, 2005; Williams, 2001). African American doctoral students may have difficulty finding a mentor or advisor who looks like them or who shares their research interest, and the university administrators may be expected to assist.

**Lack of African American faculty.** An examination of the number of the Black professoriate from the 1980’s to 2009 illuminates little change. In 1982, Carroll wrote, “White men constitute 50 percent of the associate and full professor ranks, Black men 31 percent, White women 19 percent and Black women 3 percent” (p. 116-117). The American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) conducted a study called Research About Teacher Education (RATE) from 1987 through 1995 and found that over 90% of college faculty was White. Fewer than 8 % were faculty of color, of which only 4 % were Black (Benjamin, 1997; Berry, 1982; Zimpher & Sherrill, 1996). In 2003, 15 % of this nation’s faculty was non-White, and 6 % were Black. Almost half of the faculty in America’s post secondary institutions are



White men (47 %) and close to 40 % are White women (NCES, 2009). The numbers over time reveal that not much has changed. There is still a glaring absence of Black faculty in the professorial ranks (Collins, 2001; Howard-Vital, 1989; Hinton-Johnson, 2003; Marbley, 2007; McKay, 1997; Rentz, 2003; Thompson & Louque, 2005; Woods, 2001).

A dearth of Black faculty results in overburdening the few who are in the institution (Ladson-Billings, 2005b), and it provides little hope that students will experience multidimensional perspectives of social justice in their academic pursuit (Ladson-Billings, 2005b; Peters, 2003). Most Black faculty experience what Derrick Bell (1987) describes as “[being] the personal counselor and confidante of virtually all of the Black students. The Black students clearly needed someone with whom to share their many problems” (Bell, 1987, p. 140). Black students, particularly those at Predominately White Institutions (PWIs), are looking for a friendly face in the crowd, someone who might have some idea of what it is like to be the proverbial “fly in the milk.” Black faculty, by default oftentimes, are sought out to fulfill this role (Ladson-Billings, 2005b), a role that oftentimes is not acknowledged by peer review committees during the tenure review or promotional process.

The quandary for Black female faculty is unique because racism and sexism significantly minimize the possibility of finding common ground with the gatekeepers in academe— White men (Carroll, 1982; Peters, 2003). If given the chance, Carroll (1982) asserted, Black women can provide a “richness and depth to many areas in higher education” (p. 125). Because there are so few Black faculty, African American students may have difficult and non-affirming classroom experiences.

**Classroom experiences.** There is minimum research on the classroom experiences of Black graduate students. Within the literature, several areas emerge, including curriculum and

culture (omission and oppression), classroom interactions, and feelings of isolation, each of these will be discussed below.

The literature confirms that the work of Black scholars is not an integral part of the university curriculum (Cushinberry, 2003; Duckworth-Warner, 2003). This stark absence perpetuates and reifies hegemony and racism. This dearth in the curriculum is detrimental to all students because it does not give them opportunities to question, dialogue, and critically review historical practices and beliefs that still oppress particular groups (Ladson-Billings, 2005b).

Few of the studies on Blacks in doctoral programs critically examined classroom interactions. Generally, classroom dynamics were described as Black students being the token one in the classroom (Graham, 2003; Johnson, 2003; Peters, 2003). Black graduate students noted that generally they were invisible in the classroom unless the topic was about Blacks. Often most of the students wanted the lone Black student to be the resident expert on black culture (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Graham, 2003; Johnson, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2005b; Peters, 2003), as if Blacks were a monolithic group for which that lone Black student could speak to every issue.

A few students described professors using culturally insensitive material in the classroom and not critically interrogating it, thereby reifying and perpetuating hegemony (Carter, 2003; Carter, 2008; Duckworth-Warner, 2003). For example, one student reported that one of her professors openly endorsed the claim of the Bell Curve that African Americans were genetically intellectually inferior (Garrett, 2006). Another student described an esteemed professor endorsing the Moynihan Report, remarking that “The professor stated that despite the lambasting incurred by Moynihan at the time the report was issued, some 25 years later, Moynihan was being hailed as prophetic, as evidenced by the current state of the Black family” (Carter, 2008, p.

116). Another student shared that a faculty member who was assessing incoming non-graduate students, asked “if the department were lowering standards” (Garrett, 2006, p. 192), implying that Black students did not possess the intellectual acumen to be competitive in the program.

Black students also described feelings of isolation and alienation (Howard-Vital, 1989). Thompson and Louque (2005) described students of color, particularly females, who entered graduate school feeling very confident about their ability to succeed,”[. . .] but the culture and climate of their postsecondary institution caused them to question whether or not they were smart enough to earn the degrees they sought to attain” (p. 67). Black students are often further alienated by being excluded from study groups (Pinkett, 2003). African American students not only have difficult classroom experiences, they also receive conflicting responses from the African American community, as is described in the following section.

**African American community’s response.** Education has always been important in the Black community. Black people, for the most part, have yearned to quench their thirst for knowledge even when it was legally prohibitive. When Malveaux (1996) lamented on an elderly relative asking her “When are you going to get a real job?” (p. 44), the question resonates with graduate students (Fries-Britt & Turner-Kelly, 2005; Gay, 2000). Malveaux explained that she was in school getting a doctorate in economics. The relative countered, “Didn't you get that other degree in economics,” [. . .] “Didn't you learn it right the first time?” (p. 44) Too often, family members and friends do not truly understand what it means to engage in the type of rigorous study a Ph.D. requires.

Dana Murray Patterson’s (2006) dissertation explored, in part, the impact the doctoral process has on Black women’s intimate lives. The women in the study discussed how they often had to miss important family obligations to write or fulfill some requirement of their study. For

others, their intimate relationships could not withstand the isolation that is sometimes required when the student has to write, or read; consequently, some of the relationships did not survive. Patterson's study illuminated the personal sacrifice exacted on some Black women who pursue the Ph.D.

In spite of having a dearth of mentors and advisors, the paucity of African American faculty, isolating and non-affirming classroom experiences and the conflicting response from the African American community, many Black women are steadfast in their pursuit of the Ph.D. One of academia's well-kept secrets is the high attrition rate of doctoral students (Cushinberry, 2003; Golde, 2000; Graham, 2003; Hawley, 1993; Minor, 2003). Golde (2000) wrote, "Paradoxically, the most academically capable, most academically successful, most stringently evaluated, and most carefully selected students in the entire higher education system--doctoral students are the least likely to complete their chosen academic goals" (p. 199). Golde reported the doctoral attrition rate as being consistently 40 to 50 percent.

**Theoretical framework.** For the current study, the researcher employs an Afrocentric theoretical framework. To understand Afrocentricity, one must first conceptualize and operationalize what it means to be Afrikan in the Americas. Culture in its simplest terms suggests that a group of people share a common set of beliefs, mores, and traditions. They share a common origin and perpetuate a particular way of life. Afrikan people have experienced what some Africanist scholars call "Maafa", a Ki-swahili word that means "disaster" and refers "to the enslavement of our people and to the sustained attempt to dehumanize us" (Gallman, et al, 2003, p. 15). Once one acknowledges the veracity and adverse impact of Maafa, then he or she must employ the tenets of Sankofa.

Sankofa is a Ghanaian Akan term, which means to return to the source, so one can move forward with power and clarity (Gallman, et al, 2003). Those who are committed to Sankofa are also committed to employing the counternarrative to implode and interrogate white hegemony and privilege by offering a unique and different perspective. Sankofa invites and encourages African people to connect with their ancient African past, filled with triumph and victory. Similar to the African proverb that asserted the story of the hunt would be very different if it were told by the hunted as opposed to the hunter, Black people need to be the articulators of their history, the arbiters of their stories, the griots of their past, and the prophets of their future.

African Americans have a unique legacy. They are the only immigrants who were brought to the Americas by force (Akbar, 1998; Hilliard, 1995, 1997; Karenga, 2002). Many were kidnapped, some bartered, and others were stolen. Those who survived endured the treacherous journey to the coast. All walked through the door of no return. They were placed in the belly of a cargo ship, which was filled with human defecation, sickness, and disease (Equiano, 2004; Smith, 2004). They were chained, poorly fed, and kept in the highly toxic lower deck. They were eventually sold on the open market into the most brutal and dehumanizing system of slavery known to humankind (Equiano, 2004; Smith, 2004). An Afrikan people are consciously, diligently, persistently giving voice to the African legacy that asserts and challenges the iconic, master narrative that suggests that Africans were savage, uncivilized, heathens, devoid of a rich culture and a great historical past.

Molefi Kente Asante asserts, “Afrocentricity is the conscious process by which a person locates or relocates African phenomena within an African subject content or agency and action. It is therefore location as opposed to dislocation, centeredness as opposed to marginality” (2002 p. 97). In other words, the researcher is deliberately, consciously, juxtaposing her American

lens, simultaneously imploding that lens, critiquing that lens, revisioning that lens that elevates the Western world while subjugating the African continent.

Embedded in the Afrocentric theoretical framework for this research is the basic tenets of Kwanzaa, which assist the researcher in evaluating, analyzing and interpreting the storied lives of the participants. Scholar, Dr. Maulana Karenga, to reaffirm and restore African heritage and culture, created Kwanzaa in 1966 (1998, p. 27). Kwanzaa is taken from a ki-swahili phrase, “matunda ya kwanza, which translates as harvesting of the first fruits. The five basic tenets of Kwanzaa are: ingathering – bringing the people together, reverence – acknowledging the creator; commemoration – remembering African ancestors; recommitment –dedication to the highest cultural ideals of the community; and celebration – an outward manifestation or ceremony to recognize the fruition of the labor and sacrifice (Karenga, 1998).

This theoretical framework also employs Kwanzaa’s Nguzo Saba (The Seven Principles):

- Umoja (unity)--harmony with family, community and the Diaspora;
- Kujichagulia (Self Determination)--to define, name and speak for themselves;
- Ujima (Collective Work and Responsibility)--to build and maintain the African community together;
- Ujamaa (Cooperative Economics) --concern for the well being, happiness and development of people;
- Nia (Purpose) -- nation building
- Kuumba (Creativity) -- leave our community more beautiful and beneficial than we inherited it;
- Imani (Faith): To believe with all our heart in our people, our parents, our teachers, our leaders, and the righteousness and victory of our struggle. (Karenga, 1998).

## **Discussion**

Black women have been writing about their ebony presence in the ivory tower for over 60 years; however, there is still a disparity in a critical academic critique of the experiences of Black females in the academy. The Black female presence is particularly unique because it represents a confluence of race and sex. Notwithstanding the often difficult climate Blacks experience on predominately White campuses, most of them are unwavering in their pursuit (Benjamin, 1997). Black women in the academy at the turn of the 20th century embodied a communal pursuit that was designed to uplift the race (Collins, 2001; Perkins, 1983; Randolph, 2001). They exemplified the Sanfokian principle of looking back and embracing their African ancestral roots, understanding that “I am because we are” (Gallman, et al, 2003).

A critical examination of the Black female presence in doctoral programs is necessary. Officials in Colleges of Education are essentially responsible for educating those who are primarily responsible for educating young people. Black women can provide the energy and voice in the academy to re-humanize approaches to learning and pedagogy, as King (2005) suggested. This examination should explicate not only how to get into the academy, but it should also examine what happens in higher education classrooms. It should investigate Black women’s lived experiences in their own words, aligning their stories with the Black community and constructing a story to share with academicians throughout the country.

## **Chapter Three: Methodology**

### **Research Design**

Creswell (1998) suggests that every researcher should initiate his or her research study by identifying the research design, the philosophical worldview that influences his or her study, and select the strategy for inquiry. The researcher conducted a mixed methods study to explore and understand the meaning African American females ascribe to their doctoral studies (Creswell, 1998). Bonilla-Silva (2003) admonishes that “survey instruments are useful tools for gathering general information;” however, they “restrict the free flow of ideas and the unnecessarily constrain the range of possible answers for respondents” (p. 11). This study is influenced by the researcher’s Afrocentric philosophical worldview. “Afrocentricity is the conscious process by which a person locates African phenomena within an African subject content or agency or action” (Asante, 2002, p. 97). Guba (1990) defines a worldview as “a basic set of beliefs that guides action” (p. 17). Creswell (1998) asserts that philosophical ideas are generally hidden in research, yet they influence research, and researchers must identify them and make the larger philosophical ideas they espouse explicit.

For the current study, the researcher answers three research questions:

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the educational experiences of African American women in doctoral programs?
2. What strategies do successful African American women utilize to be successful in doctoral programs?
3. Do Afrocentric sensibilities impact African American female doctoral students as they complete their graduate work? And if so, how



## **The Researcher**

The researcher is an African American female who was in a doctoral program and embraces an Afrocentric philosophical worldview. The researcher was deliberately and consciously transparent in this endeavor and consistently solicited member checks from the dissertation committee to maintain honesty and integrity in this study to minimize any bias, and when bias was evident, the researcher strived to disclose it.

S. Villenas (2010) asserted, in the context of encouraging Chicana/o ethnographers, that researchers:

must recognize their multidimensional identities as colonizers, colonized, neither, and in-between. We comaradas in struggle must work from within and facilitate a process where Latinas/os become the subjects and the creators of knowledge. My answer to the ethnographer-as-colonizer dilemma is that I will not stop at being the public translator and facilitator for my communities, but that I am my own voice, an activist seeking liberation from my own historical oppression in relation to my communities (pp. 345-362).

Villenas' words are very instructive for this study. Although the current study was not an ethnography, this researcher accepts Villenas's charge to assist those in the academy and the African American community to seek liberation from historical oppression.

The researcher examined the ways Afrocentric sensibilities impacted Black females' experiences in doctoral programs. Scholars who embrace the tenets of Afrocentricity also embrace the "right and the responsibility to describe reality from their own perspective" (Reviere, 2001, p. 711). Asante asserts that scholars must embrace three basic Afrocentric beliefs: 1) They must uncover the hidden, subtle, and racist theories embedded in current methodologies; 2) They must work to "legitimize the centrality of African ideals and values as a

valid frame of reference for acquiring and examining data;” and 3) They must “maintain inquiry rooted in a strict interpretation of place” (Reviere, 2001, p. 712).

An Afrocentric belief also requires the researcher to understand, recognize, acknowledge and maintain community, so it encourages a pursuit of communal uplift (Reviere, 2001).

Afrocentricity requires both introspection and retrospection. Introspection requires the researcher to ask “Who am I socially, historically and politically?” (Reviere, 2001, p. XX).

### **Data Collection**

This research study is based on quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data were collected through an online survey, consisting of 32 open ended, yes/no and multiple-choice items. A copy of the survey can be found in Appendix B. The survey questions were framed to incorporate Asante’s core Afrocentric beliefs, and they were also aligned to assess the four issues that resonated in the literature: lack of mentors, lack of African American faculty, non-affirming classroom experiences, and the African American community’s conflicting response. Based on the core Afrocentric beliefs that Asante details above, participants who exhibited Afrocentric sensibilities were those who embodied any of the following characteristics:

- Promotes pride in her African heritage
- Sees value in earning a terminal degree, in part, to uplift Black people
- Challenges reifying, white hegemonic classroom experiences
- When faced with deficit theories about Black people in class, offers a counter-argument, or at least, challenges the deficit theory.
- When posited as the “resident expert,” recognizes what is happening and seizes the opportunity to implode it.
- Does not deliberately distance herself from conducting research about Black people.

- Finds value in including scholarship about Black people, and by Black scholars, as an integral component of doctoral studies.
- Finds importance in having African American faculty.
- Defines Afrocentricity and recognizes its importance in her life. (Asante, 2002; Reviere, 2001)

The on-line questionnaire was posted on Survey Monkey. The researcher checked a number of university websites and noted names and contact information for any phenotypically Black women. An email was sent to that group, soliciting participation in the study. An email was also sent to a number of black, female, professional organizations and a number of Black graduate student organizations and sororities. An announcement was posted in an on-line African American Humanities and Social Science newsletter. It was posted on the social network, Facebook, and the researcher asked friends and colleagues to tell any Black women they knew, who had a doctorate, about the research study.

Incentives to participate in this on-line questionnaire were offered. The incentives included: one \$200 VISA gift card, one \$100 VISA gift card; one \$50 Barnes and Noble gift card, and two \$25 Starbucks gift cards. As the respondents completed the survey, the researcher mailed a thank you note and a raffle ticket to all those who provided a mailing address. At the end of the study, tickets were randomly selected. The drawing was videotaped. Each winner was notified and the gift was mailed.

The researcher's goal was to get 100 responses to the on-line survey. As the women responded, the researcher started counting down on Facebook. Several friends posted to Facebook; they did not understand the purpose of the survey, but they helped count down and provided daily words of encouragement and support. In addition, a number of the researcher's

friends reached out to their friends through Facebook and referred them to the researcher's page to get additional information. The response to, and support of, this process was phenomenal, exciting, and reaffirming.

Within three weeks, 102 responses to the on-line survey were received. Sixty-five of the women agreed to a one-on-one interview. An Afrocentric rubric was created. The researcher used the rubric to evaluate five of the survey responses designed to analyze tenets of Afrocentricity: promote African pride; use degree for communal uplift; identify as Black or African American; challenge hegemony and find value in Black scholarship and scholars. The respondents who did not self-report as African American or Black were eliminated. Based on the rubric analysis and the responses to the following survey questions: Can you define Afrocentricity? Do you consider yourself Afrocentric? Can you provide two examples that best describe Afrocentricity? The respondents were placed into three primary categories. The three categories were Category 1-- Afrocentric self-reported and the examples provided aligned with the tenets of Afrocentricity; Category 2 -- Afrocentric self-reported and the examples provided did not align with the tenets of Afrocentricity; Category 3 -- did not self-report as Afrocentric.

The three primary groups were further broken down by three additional categories: Coursework (CW) – the respondent was still taking coursework or had completed coursework but had not defended the research proposal; All But Dissertation (ABD) – the respondent had completed the coursework, defended the proposal and was working on the dissertation; and PhD – the respondent had earned the degree. Within each category, there were three groups. For example, CW1 – respondent had not defended research proposal, self-reported as Afrocentric and the examples provided were consistent with the tenets of Afrocentricity, and so on.

## **Interview**

Initially, 27 participants, who represented a diversity of doctoral candidates, (i.e., region, size of institution, research interests and personal experience), were selected to participate in the interviews. Purposeful sampling, which selects participants based upon specific criteria, was used to identify common patterns in the participants' experiences (Higginbottom, 2004). The initial 27 participants were deliberately selected to represent each of the three categories:

Category 1 -- Afrocentric self-reported and survey responses aligned with tenets of Afrocentricity; Category 2 -- Afrocentric self-reported and survey responses did not align with the tenets of Afrocentricity, and Category 3 -- self-reported not Afrocentric. In other words, the researcher sought to have a representative sample from each of the three Afrocentric categories.

Each participant was solicited by email to participate in the one-on-one interview. As participants responded, one-on-one interviews were scheduled, mailing addresses and current telephone numbers were confirmed, and informed consent packages were mailed. For those participants who did not immediately respond, two follow-up emails were sent, and the researcher attempted to make telephone contact with them. If the attempts were successful, interviews were scheduled.

A very ambitious interview schedule was employed, but a number of participants were unable or unwilling to participate in one-on-one interviews because of comprehensive exams, teaching schedules, or other obligations. Eighteen participants were interviewed. Most who participated did so by telephone, a few used the webcam, and one submitted her responses by email. Each interview was scheduled for one hour. Most of them exceeded an hour and one respondent had to be scheduled for a second session. Most of the follow-up discussions were conducted through email.

## Participants

Historically, Black women have had to forge a space within a space that vigorously resisted them. Phillis Wheatley, the first African American woman to publish a book and gain international acclaim, stolen from the west coast of Africa and enslaved, defied the naysayers with her poetic musings (Evans, 2007; Gates & McKay, 2004; Gray-White, 1999; Gray-White, 2008; Harley & Terborg-Penn, 1978; Lerner, 1972); or Maria Stewart, the first African American woman political writer, who says, “Who shall go forward, and take off the reproach that is cast upon the people of color? Shall it be a woman?” (Gates & McKay, 2004, p. 252). Anna Julia Cooper makes a case before Black male clergy regarding the Black woman’s role in regenerating the Black race, and she writes, “only the Black woman can say “when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole *Negro race enters with me*” (Gates & McKay, 2004, p. 644). Cooper argues that as the Black community developed a plan of betterment and uplift, after the abolition of slavery, Black women had to be an integral member in that discussion. Black men could not define their role.

The women in this study courageously and willingly took up the torch of their female predecessors and embraced the tenets of Sankofa in giving homage to them in remembering “stony the road we trod; bitter the chast’ning rod; felt in the days when hope unborn had died; yet with a steady beat; have not our weary feet; come to the place for which our fathers sighed?” (Johnson, 2004, p. 794). They understood that the road would not be easy, but they had to continue the quest for those who did it before them, and more importantly, for those who would come after them.

The nineteen women who volunteered to participate in this study all had very rich, interesting, and diverse experiences. They represented a variety of disciplines. They were

young, mature, single, and married. Two of them were divorcees who were single handedly raising young children. A number of the participants expressed gratitude for having an opportunity to share their stories. Many described their doctoral experiences as hurtful, painful, and traumatic. Few described the experience as fulfilling, nurturing, or pleasant. All of the participants were candid and accommodating. Their stories were illustrations of resilience, perseverance, and fortitude. Each participant was asked to select a pseudonym for the study. For those who did not select one, the researcher used the names of prominent African American female writers and her three granddaughters. A brief introduction of the respondents follows:

### **Savannah**

Savannah was a light skinned Black woman, with long, straight, black hair. The researcher Skyped with Savannah on an early Saturday morning. When the researcher asked for permission to Skype, Savannah responded, with a chuckle, “let me go comb my hair first. You can’t be calling nobody on Skype first thing when you wake up in the morning.” There was a familiarity in her greeting, a sister-friend kinship that was immediate and comforting. Savannah sat at, what appeared to be, her dining room table with a big cup of coffee. She responded to the questions, periodically sipping her coffee and alternately stroking her hair. Her hands were very animated.

Savannah resided in the South. She completed her undergraduate degree in Early Childhood Education at a Historically Black College or University (HBCU). She received her Master’s degree in Women’s Studies and her Ph.D. in Education from a PWI University. She completed her doctoral program in seven years, earning her degree in 2008. She conceived and gave birth to one of her sons while completing her program. She taught Introductory Sociology courses and worked for a nonprofit organization. Savannah was married and had two sons.

Savannah was raised “in a family of educated professionals.” She was a fourth generation HBCU graduate. She was very involved with her alma mater. Her father was an attorney, who had worked for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People’s (NAACP) legal redress committee. He was a civil rights advocate, and he worked on a variety of landmark cases.

Savannah described her early childhood educational experiences as isolating. She was often the lone African American child in the classroom. She related, “I lived a life of wealth and privilege; we lived in the inner city. Once the bussing laws were passed in the (19)80’s, he (her father) took us out of private school and put us on the bus to prove that it was beneficial and other Black people should do the same.” Savannah shared retrospectively that as she analyzed her early childhood experiences from a critical perspective, feelings of duality, loneliness and hurt emerged, as well.

A couple of years ago, Savannah gave a presentation at a Desegregation Conference. She shared her story of isolation and duality. At this same conference, an 18 year old, African American, female related her own story of isolation, the teenager talked about, ‘being forced to live in these dual worlds, she had to be one person at home and one person out here in the county’. Savannah said, “I was brought to tears, and I remembered 25 years prior, I was her in a lot of ways.” Savannah racially identified as African American.

## **Maya**

Maya participated in a telephone interview. She currently resided on the east coast. The researcher called Maya at 10:00 PM EST on a Friday evening. She was scheduled to conduct an early afternoon interview, but the researcher developed a severe migraine. When she recovered, she immediately called Maya, and apologized profusely. Maya was given the option of re-



scheduling. The researcher knew Maya had three small daughters. Maya was extremely accommodating.

When asked to describe herself, Maya responded, “I have three daughters (5,4,1).” Her priority was her children. She grew up in the South. She currently resided on the east coast. She was All But Dissertation (ABD). Her undergraduate, M.A. and Ph.D. were all in English. She went into the doctorate program because she wanted to teach at the collegiate level. She racially identified as Black American.

### **Zora**

Zora participated in a Skype interview. She was small in stature with a strong, raspy, Billie Holiday voice. Zora resided on the west coast. She earned a B.A. in Liberal Studies, with an emphasis in Education, a M.A. in Curriculum and Instruction, and she was currently completing coursework in an Ed.D. program in Education, with a concentration in literacy. She was married and had three adult children and three grandchildren. Zora was very active in civic organizations in the community. She had been an elementary school teacher for 15 years. Her peers nominated her as Teacher of the Year. She was selected as one of five finalists for County Teacher of the Year. She had obtained National Board certification. She racially identified as African American.

### **Octavia**

Octavia participated in a Skype interview. One of Octavia’s most endearing qualities was her smile. She was a very cheerful woman. She had a B.A. in Humanities, a M.A. in English and Anthropology, and she was currently ABD in Anthropology. Octavia resided in the northeastern United States. A single mother who Octavia described as being militant, at one time, raised her. Octavia stated, “I didn’t grow up around a lot of Black people. Most of my friends are white.” She said, “When you’ve been in all of these predominately white institutional

systems, you would think that it would make somebody more Afrocentric. I definitely became less so just because it's like an adaptive strategy." Octavia was pursuing a PhD because she wanted to have a comfortable life for herself and her future children, so they would not have to "work as hard as our ancestors did."

When asked how she racially identified, Octavia responded, "Black--I grew up a little Black girl in a home with Black people. There's a power in that word that the politically correct "African American" doesn't have."

### **Ella**

Ella participated in a phone interview. She was under the age of 30 and expected to complete her studies in 2014. She resided on the east coast. She had a B.A. in Political and Social Thought and African and African American Studies, a M.A. in Africana Studies, and she was enrolled in a Ph.D. program in Anthropology. Ella's parents earned undergraduate degrees. Her father earned a MBA. When asked how she racially identified, she responded, "African American." She said, "I refer to myself as Black or African American because the majority of my friends and acquaintances are Black."

### **Nell**

Nell participated in a phone interview. At the time, she was within days of delivering her third son. She completed her doctorate in seven years, earning the degree in 2007. She had a B.A. in Classical Civilization and English, a M.A. in English and African American and African Studies and her Ph.D. was in English. She resided on the east coast. She's married and had three sons. She enrolled in a PhD program because she "likes learning." She racially identified as "Black".

## **Audre**

Audre participated in a phone interview. She resided on the east coast, although she earned her degree from a PWI on the west coast. She earned a B.A. in Anthropology. She earned two M.A.s, one in Public Health and the other in Public Administration. Her Ph.D. was in Public Administration. It took Audre nine years to complete her program, largely because of what she perceived as roadblocks by her committee.

When Audre was young, her parents moved the family from the South to an affluent community on the west coast. She and her siblings participated in the voluntary busing program. Although she attended predominately white, elite, schools, she grew up in a stable, Black, middle-class community, as she described it. She attended a Black church, took piano lessons from a Black teacher, but she did not experience a lot of social interactions with other Black children. She had to learn how to be bi-cultural. She reflected that she received positive and reaffirming messages from her family and the Black community, as a child, but when she went into predominately white spaces, the messages were negative and violent.

The researcher was initially perplexed by Audre's Afrocentric rhetoric. Generally, when a Black person was immersed in white spaces and severed from authentic Black experiences, he or she grew up with a very Eurocentric perspective. Audre, however, did not exhibit those qualities. In fact, she espoused rhetoric similar to one who was familiar with the Black Panther or US organizations. Audre described enrolling in a PWI for undergraduate studies, and experiencing a convergence with her void in social interactions with Blacks and being introduced to Black political rhetoric and cultural centers. This introduction compelled Audre to do her own research. She read Carter G. Woodson's, *Miseducation of the Negro*. Audre stated, "I read that and I went off. I went ballistic because it opened my eyes to my entire life experience." She said, [I found a] "group of Black people who were highly political, highly educated, had a

vocabulary, had an analysis, and even though I was somewhat shy and taken aback. I was open to listening. I became very angry with my parents because neither one of them ever talked about race.” Audre later traveled to Africa with a Methodist missionary organization that trained young people in global social activism. Audre racially identified as “African American,” “Black,” and or part of the African Diaspora; it depended on the context.

### **Faith**

Faith participated in a phone interview. She resided in the South. Her B.A. was in Child Development. Her M.A. was in Early Childhood Education and her Ph.D. was in Early Childhood Education. She started her program in 2003. She expected to complete the program in 2011. She had difficult pregnancies and had to be on bed rest for extended periods. These difficulties had prolonged her tenure in the program. She had two young sons and had recently divorced. She entered the doctorate program because it was a personal goal and she wanted to teach at her alma mater. She racially identified as “Black.”

### **Souljah**

Souljah participated in a Skype interview. She was a petite woman who wore a head wrap and large, dangling, earrings. She wore a burgundy tank top, and she appeared to sit at her desk. She had earned a B.A. in Sociology and English, and she was in a Ph.D. program in Sociology at a university on the east coast. She expected to graduate in 2013.

Souljah’s father was Nigerian. Her mother grew up on the west coast; her roots were in the South. Both parents were first generation college students. Souljah described herself as having a “Black radical political perspective.” She was currently involved in community organizing activities in her community.

Souljah enrolled in a doctorate program because she enjoyed conducting research. As an undergraduate, Souljah gained invaluable experience working on research projects. These

experiences engendered her desire to develop her academic acuity with a critical perspective, so she might later assist the Black community in a meaningful way. Souljah racially identified as “Black.” She responded, “My father is a Black African, my mother is a Black American. I am an African American, in that sense, but I prefer the term Black. I think it connects me to a Diaspora in a way that “African American” does not.”

### **Toni**

Toni taught at a public university in the southwest. The researcher interviewed Toni in her campus office, on an early Saturday morning. Toni grew up on the west coast. She earned her B.A. in Math, her M.A. in Education, and she was in a Ph.D. program in Education. She started her Ph.D. program in 2007, and she expected to earn the terminal degree in 2011. Toni had two daughters. She racially identified as African American.

### **Harriet**

Harriet started her doctoral program in 2008, and she expected to earn her degree in 2013. She had earned a B.A. in English, a M.A. in Educational Administration and was in a Ph.D. program in Education. She came from a large family. She had eight siblings. She was a first generation college graduate. She pursued a terminal degree for professional development because she needed the authority to incorporate social justice theory into her practice. Harriet racially identified as “Black.” She said her definition was a political protest. She used the term to evoke the racialized oppression and socio-historical connections that are consistently rejected by institutional structures.

### **Anna**

Anna started her doctoral program in 2008. She expected to graduate in 2014. Anna had earned a B.A. in computers, a M.A. in Learning Disabilities and was in a Ph.D. program in School Psychology. She was the oldest of four sisters, and she was the first one in her family to

attend and graduate from college. She was married to a wonderful husband, as she described him. Anna enjoyed watching sports, particularly college football and basketball. She also enjoys hanging out with friends. She was pursuing a terminal degree because to practice as a school psychologist in her state, you must have at least a specialist degree. Anna racially identified as African American. She explained, “Over the last couple of years, I've tried to move beyond identifying myself racially since it is a socially-constructed word. I would rather identify myself based on an ethnicity.”

### **Aaliyah**

When Aaliyah was contacted, she was not feeling well, however, she proceeded with the interview. Aaliyah had a B.A. and M.A. in Psychology. She started her Ph.D. in Psychology in 2006 at a university in the southwestern United States. At the time of the interview, she had completed her dissertation. She did a literature review on the behavioral patterns of, and best clinical modalities for, the Native American population. She was completing her internship in the northeast, and she expected to earn the degree in 2011.

Aaliyah had one brother. Her mother was a single parent. Aaliyah describes herself as being one of a few, or more often than not, the sole African American student in Honors courses in high school. She shared that over 80% of Black students were automatically tracked into the vocational program. She, too, was tracked into the vocational program. She had to fight to be placed in Honors classes, where over 90% of the students were white.

When asked why she pursued the terminal degree, Aaliyah wrote, I decided I wanted to be a psychologist at the age of 12, and I stuck with that goal.” Aaliyah racially identified as “African American” or “Black.”

## **Aaniyah**

Aaniyah resided in the North. She participated in a telephone interview. The first thing the researcher noted was the joy that emanated from Aaniyah's voice. She did not appear to be encumbered by the mundane pressures of life. Aaniyah described herself as a child of married parents. Her mother earned a M.Ed., and her father received a high school diploma and served in the military. Aaniyah had two siblings. She was a licensed psychologist and counselor.

Aaniyah described her program as a hybrid. She stated:

Counseling and psychology are two different fields, even though they are very similar. We had to do the coursework for both counseling and psychology because they're two different disciplines. We had a one year residency and a one year internship before we finished school. We had a dissertation and oral and written comps, and we still had to do a post doc year in order to get the license.

She loved to travel, participate in long distance running, and yoga. She earned a B.A. in Psychology, a M.A. in Counseling, and she earned a Ph.D. in Psychology and Counseling. Aaniyah pursued the terminal degree because she was interested in furthering her education and, she needed it for a psychology license. She racially identified as African American. She shared, "I was raised in a household that stresses the importance of being proud of my heritage." The researcher asked Aaniyah to expound on what she meant by "the importance of being proud of my heritage". Aaniyah responded:

Back in 1972, I was born to this mother who was going to college, undergrad, and she was really into African studies. She had like the red, black, and green painted walls, and just really, really pro black. She was married to my father who had gotten out of the military. He had experienced the discriminatory stuff in the U.S. but found it to be a little better in Germany. They both find it [the U.S.] to be a very racially stifling

area. It was you are black and be proud, and stay away from everybody else's type of upbringing, which is interesting because it's kind of inconsistent with the way I see the world, but I can completely understand what they see. It was too stressful to walk around worrying about everybody else all the time.

### **Alice**

Alice resided on the east coast. She was forwarded a link about this study and contacted the researcher several times to get information, so she could participate. She earned a B.A. and M.A. in Psychology. She started a Ph.D. program in Psychology in 2006. She expected to graduate in 2011. Alice's parents divorced when she was young; however, she remained close with both of her parents. She had three brothers. She racially identified as Black. She offered, "I do not identify as African American. I feel like African American is a better term used for those who are from Africa and have moved to America."

### **Dr. Bell**

Dr. Bell was an African immigrant. She attended college in the Pacific Northwest, earning her B.A. in English and her M.A. in Business Management. She began her Ph.D. program in Business, with an emphasis in international business and marketing in 1996 at a university in the southwestern United States. She completed the program in 2002. She was a tenure track professor at a large community college in the Southwest. Dr. Bell racially identified as Black.

### **Sojourner**

Sojourner was the only participant who provided a written response to the interview protocol. She and the researcher had a difficult time finding a mutually agreeable time to conduct a phone interview; however, Sojourner wanted to participate in the study, so she transmitted her responses via email.



Sojourner earned a B.A. in Political Science, a M.A. in Africana Women Studies, and she was in a Doctorate of Arts in Humanities with a History Concentration at a Historically Black College or University (HBCU). She started her program in 2002, and she expected to earn the terminal degree in 2010. She entered the doctoral program because she wanted to teach college. She was the mother of two small children, and she racially identified as African American.

### **Aamiyah**

Aamiyah resided in the Midwest. She had a B.A., M.Ed, and Ph.D. in Psychology. She completed her program in nine years. She was the youngest of six children. She completed her undergraduate and M.A. at a Historically Black University of College (HBCU), and she earned the terminal degree from a Predominately White Institution (PWI). She belonged to a traditional, iconic Black sorority. She was very active in her church and served as a youth advisor. She was also a mentor to LGBTQ youth. Aamiyah pursued a doctorate because she wanted to teach graduate level courses at the university. She indicated that she became interested in psychology as a preteen, and when she began her undergraduate studies, she began forging a path to the doctoral program. Aamiyah racially identified as African American. She wrote, “race is a socially constructed concept. I prefer to use the ethnicities that best define my understanding of my heritage/ancestry.”

Table 1 illustrates how the participants were categorized based upon the Afrocentric rubric.

Table 1

*Interview Participants*

Name	Age	Major	Region	Status	Afrocentricity
Savanah	31-40	Education	South	PHD	3
Maya	20-30	English	Northeast	ABD	2
Zora	41-50	Education	West	CW	1
Octavia	20-30	Anthro	Northeast	ABD	2
Ella	20-30	Anthro	East	CW	1
Nell	31-40	English	East	PHD	3
Audre	41-50	Pub Adm	West	PHD	1
Faith	31-40	Education	South	CW	2
Souljah	20-30	Sociology	East	CW	2
Toni	31-40	Education	West	CW	3
Nandi	20-30	English	Midwest	PHD	1
Harriet	31-40	Education	East	CW	3
Anna	31-40	Psychology	South	CW	2
Aaliyah	20-30	Psychology	Midwest	ABD	2
Aaniyah	31-40	Psychology	North	PHD	2
Alice	20-30	Psychology	East	ABD	3
Dr. Bell	51-60	Business	West	PHD	3
Sojourner	31-40	African St	Midwest	CW	2
Aamiyah	31-40	Psychology	Midwest	PHD	3

Note. Status - \*PHD – the participant had earned the degree. ABD – the participant had been advanced to candidacy and was all but dissertation. CW – the participant was completing course work.

\*\* Afrocentricity—One were those who self-reported as being Afrocentric and the examples provided aligned with the tenets of Afrocentricity. Two were those who self-reported as being Afrocentric; however, the examples provided did not align with the tenets of Afrocentricity. Three were those who self-reported as not being Afrocentric.

## Data Analysis

The nineteen participants represented a variety of disciplines and were in various stages of the doctoral process. Seven women had earned the degree, four had been advanced to candidacy, and eight were completing coursework. A variety of disciplines were represented including Education (5), English (3), Psychology (5), Africana Studies (1), Business (1), Anthropology (2), Public Administration (1) and Sociology (1). Six women were under the age of 30; nine were between 31 and 40 years of age; two were between 41 and 50 years of age; and

one was over the age of 50. The participants resided in various parts of the United States. Three were from the South; two from the northeast, four were from the west, five from the east, four from the Midwest and one from the north. Seven participants indicated that they were not Afrocentric. Eight indicated they were Afrocentric, but the examples they provided on the survey did not align with the tenets of Afrocentricity, and four self reported as Afrocentric and the examples they provided aligned with the tenets of Afrocentricity.

## **Chapter Four: Quantitative**

One of the researcher's guiding mantras, on the quest for a Ph.D., was Audre Lorde's (1984) "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action." Lorde was musing about a conference presentation for the Modern Language Association, an invitation, coincidentally, that came at the last minute. Lorde was a strong warrior, poet; however, she had some apprehension about how she would be received by a largely White body. Lorde (1984) says, "Within this country where racial difference creates a constant, if unspoken, distortion of vision, Black women have on one hand always been highly visible, and so, on the other hand, have been rendered invisible through the depersonalization of racism" (p. 42). In other words, Black women were highly visible because of the color of their skin but they were simultaneously invisible because of America's revisioning of history and the reality of racism and sexism.

As the researcher read and listened to the participants' stories, it evoked thoughts about the courage and humility that emboldened Harriet Jacobs to tell her very personal story, or Anna Julia Cooper who was in a constant battle with not only Whites, but Black men, to recognize that Black women's voices and experiences needed to be heard and acknowledged, or the sacrifice and fearlessness of Ida Barnett Wells who, at great personal peril, wrote the story of Black men's bodies hanging from trees in the South, but she was undaunted and chronicled those horrific stories so that those in power could have a body count. The researcher thought about the countless, unnamed, unrecognized Black mothers, sisters, aunties, and grandmothers, who gave up their dreams so that future generations could thrive in this land of opportunity.

The researcher did not embark on this journey alone. She was carried on the backs of ancestors who endured the Holocaust of slavery (Karenga, 2002), the foothold of segregation and discrimination, and yet continued to fight for truth, justice and reciprocity. These stories had to

be birthed from the struggles of Black women who endured an academy that oftentimes disparaged, rejected, and humiliated them. Many of the women in the academy persevered with little or no academic support. Many of them experienced isolation and loneliness, but on the backs of their ancestors, they took up the cloak of vigilance and continued to fight. There were also those whose stories would never be told because they became casualties of the academy. The struggle was too great; they dropped out of the race. The researcher sought to answer three questions: What are the educational experiences of Black women? What strategies to Black women use to successfully complete their programs? Do Afrocentric sensibilities impact African American female students as they complete their graduate work?

The data analysis was presented in two chapters. The quantitative analysis was presented here and the qualitative data were presented in Chapter Five. Each participant completed an on-line survey. The survey contained 12 dichotomous, and eight open-ended questions. A copy of the questionnaire was included as Appendix B.

### **What Do the Numbers Tell Us?**

One hundred and two women completed the on-line survey. More than half of them had earned a Ph.D. or Ed.D. Over 20% were all but dissertation (ABD), and the remaining 22% were completing coursework.

Table 2

#### *Educational Status of Respondents*

Status	Number	Percentage
Received Ph.D. or Ed.D.	54	52.9
All But Dissertation	23	22.5
Completing Course Work	22	21.6
No Response	3	2.9
Total	102	100.0

Twenty percent of the women were between the ages of 20-30. Over half were between the ages of 31-40; Eighteen percent were between 41-50, and fewer than 10% were over the age of 50.

Table 3

*Age of Participants*

Age	Number	Percentage
20-30	20	19.6
31-40	54	52.9
41-50	18	17.6
51-60	5	4.9
Over 60	4	3.9
No Response	1	1
Total	102	100.0

The majority of the respondents, 68 of them, started their doctoral pursuit within the last 10 years. Twenty-three of them started their studies in the 1990s, two in the 1980s, four in the 1970s, and five did not declare their dates of beginning.

Table 4

*When Participants' Started Programs*

Year Started	Number	Percentage
1972-1978	4	3.9
1980-1989	2	1.9
1992-1999	23	22.5
2000-2010	68	66.7
No Response	5	4.9
Total	102	100.0

### **Historical Overview: What's in a Name?**

One of the most interesting statistics was how the participants self-reported their race. It was an open-ended question, so the respondents had considerable latitude to articulate their preference. The numbers were interesting because a majority of the women expounded on, or moved well beyond, the government sanctioned racial categories.

In “African to African American,” Smitherman (1999) chronicled the history of racial categories used to describe phenotypically Black people. The first Africans brought to the colonies were called “African.” They were further distinguished by their condition: free or enslaved. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, several generations of Blacks were born on American soil and there were fewer shipments of African cargo. African was supplanted by the term “Colored.” At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Black leaders were attempting to foster a new identity that incorporated full citizenship and to put some distance between the Holocaust of slavery and its collateral damage. They opted to use Negro. By the late 1960s, Black activist and leader, Stokeley Carmichael, called for Black Power. In other words, as Langston Hughes articulated some 60 years before, Black people were going to define themselves, no matter what anyone said. There was a distinct and discernible shift to abandon the “slavery imposed name,” repudiate whiteness, and reject assimilation (Smitherman, 1999, p. 47). Phenotypically African people were now called “Black.” In the 1980s, there was yet another ideological shift for Blacks to identify with their two selves: African and American. This was a conscious effort to forge an allegiance to Mother Africa and to link Black people to America. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, “Black” and “African American” were often used interchangeably.

### **Racial Identity**

Ninety-nine of the participants answered the question asking them to self-report their racial identity. Forty-three respondents identified as African American; forty-one identified as Black; twelve identified as African American and Black; one identified as Afro-American and two declined to identify a racial category and three respondents did not respond to the question. Ten of the respondents, who identified as Black, also indicated they had a Diasporic racial identity, including West African, Jamaican, Caribbean, Puerto Rican, Belizean, Cape Verdean, and Barbadian.

Table 5

*Racial Identity of Participants*

Status	Number	Percentage
African American	43	42.2
Black	41	40.2
African American and Black	12	11.8
Afro-American	1	.9
No Response	5	4.9
Total	102	100.0

A number of the respondents also offered a rationale for their choice. One respondent said, “a strong, proud, intelligent, independent, African American woman.” Another wrote, “I must give first priority to my country of historical origin (which is my African heritage), and then I identify myself as an American because of my acculturation.” A respondent, who racially identified as Black, wrote, “I understand that the PC term is African American; however, when I look in the mirror, I SEE BLACK.” A respondent with a rather lengthy response described a verbal exchange between herself and a male acquaintance. They were debating the appropriate term for Black people to use. She used Black. He, on the other hand, preferred African American because, as he described it, it was a racial category, while Black was a racial term. The respondent countered, “I didn’t grow up African American. I grew up a little Black girl in a home with Black people. There’s power in that word that the politically correct ‘African American’ doesn’t have,” she said. One woman, who identified as Black, wrote, “As a political protest, I use the term to evoke the racialized oppression and socio-historical connections that consistently are rejected by institutional structures.” Finally, one respondent eloquently described why she racially identified as Black. She wrote, “My close friends and I all shared the same types of experiences, growing up in Black communities, spending an entire Saturday at the beautician, eating collard greens and curry chicken and a plethora of other Black dishes was the



norm.” She went further to say, “African American is a word that groups together individuals who share the same skin color, but [it] does not take into account the vast heritages and experiences that ‘Black’ people share. One can be Black, but not be African American.” The women were taking the time to provide some commentary on the political and socio-historical significance of what Black people were called. Their commentary confirmed that Black people still struggled with what they should be called. More importantly, it offered some insight into the relevance of the political and socio-historical identity of Blacks in this country.

### **Success**

One of the questions the researcher attempted to address was what were the strategies African American women utilized to be successful in doctoral programs? To that extent, one of the survey questions (see Appendix B) asked the respondents if they experienced success in their doctoral studies. It was a dichotomous question. This question was followed by an open-ended question in which participants were asked to describe their success. The answers to both of those questions follow.

Ninety-seven respondents answered this question. Ninety-three percent of them report experiencing success in their doctoral programs. Four percent reported that they had not experienced any success and three percent of them did not respond. The results can be found in Table 6.

Table 6

#### *Participants Experienced Success in Doctoral Program*

Status	Number	Percentage
Yes	95	93.1
No	4	3.9
No Response	3	2.9
Total	102	100.0

Sixty-eight participants responded to the follow up question, which asked them to describe why they were successful. The narrative responses were coded and most of them fell into three primary categories: “Earned the Degree,” “Mentors,” and “Awards, Scholarships or Funding”. Twenty-three of them attributed their success to earning the terminal degree. Their comments included, “I received my PhD.” “I completed the degree.” “I finished!” “I was the first Black and the first woman to get a PhD. at [this] University.” “I completed my work; I obtained the degree.” Eleven participants attributed their success to the relationship they had with their mentors. They wrote, “Great teachers!” “I had some amazing mentors;” “I had supportive mentors;” “I had a wonderful adviser and dissertation committee.” Five participants attributed their success to being nominated for dissertation, departmental, or teaching awards and obtaining fellowships and/or scholarships: “I had external grants” and “I won the top university-wide dissertation fellowship, the top teaching award and a post-doctoral fellowship.” The remaining categories, each totaling fewer than 10% of the responses, including employment, funding, lack of academic support, progress towards the degree, and publishing. The results can be found in Table 7.

Table 7

*Success Definition Categories*

Category	Number	Percentage
Awards	5	4.9
Earned the Degree	23	22.5
Employment	2	1.9
Funding	9	8.8
Lack of Academic Support	2	1.9
Mentors	11	10.8
Progress towards Degree	8	7.8
Publishing	6	5.9
No Response	36	35.3
Total	102	100.0

Of interest was that the top three categories of success, earning the degree, mentorship, and obtaining funding—each was integral to a participant's success in the tenure-track. These women appeared to be getting a head start or at least a glimpse at what might be expected after they earned the terminal degree.

### **Educational Experiences**

The researcher purposefully structured the survey questions to address the four primary educational experiences Black students faced and which resonated in the literature. Black students had classroom experiences that could be directly attributed to their race. Consequently, they were typically looked upon to be resident experts on Black culture and/or experiences. In other words, they were expected, unlike White students, to represent Black people all the time; the presumption was Black people were a monolithic group. The third issue was that Black students typically do not have mentors and/or advisors to guide them through the politics of the doctoral journey and the hidden rules and curriculum of the university. There was not a critical mass of Black faculty at the university, resulting in a lack of mentors for Black students and limited exposure to Black scholarship and pedagogy for all students. Finally, Black women experienced a conflicting response, from the African American community, regarding their doctoral pursuit. On the one hand the community was very proud and supportive; and on the other hand, it did not understand the process or the time required to complete the degree.

The survey questions were deliberately designed to address the issues described above. To discern the participants' classroom experiences, a dichotomous question was asked first. Then that question was followed by an open-ended question to give the participants an opportunity to elaborate on their experiences. Each of the four issues was considered independently, extrapolating the statistical data and using the participants' words to expound on the quantitative data.

**Experience directly attributed to race.** To gain information on classroom dynamics and to compare the participants' responses to what the literature suggested, specific questions were asked. Ninety-nine participants responded to the question "Have you ever had an experience that you can directly attribute to your race?" Fifty-one percent of the respondents answered affirmatively. The results can be found in Table 8.

Table 8

*Participants Experiences Attributed to Race*

Response	Number	Percentage
Yes	52	51.0
No	47	46.1
No Response	3	2.9
Total	102	100.0

Of the 99 respondents, 35 provided an explanation for their response. The narrative responses were coded and fell into five categories including, "Funding," "Insensitivity," "Intellectual Acuity," "Intra-racism," and "Isolation."

**Funding.** Four percent of the respondents attributed being awarded a variety of scholarships and/or fellowships to their race. They wrote, "I [received] a fellowship for minorities, so I guess I can attribute that to my race." "I received a fellowship geared towards diversifying the student population and served on the diversity committee." "I was awarded my first fellowship because I was African American." "I" received a scholarship that was specifically for African American students and funded by an African American alumni." "Most of the scholarships I received were in part, because of my race and gender."

**Insensitivity.** Students often described professors using culturally insensitive material in the classroom and not critically interrogating it, thereby reifying and perpetuating hegemony. The majority of the narrative responses fell into the Insensitivity category. Twenty

percent of the respondents attributed their experiences to insensitivity on the part of faculty and cohorts. Some of their experiences were blatantly overt, while others were insidious and subtle. One participant wrote, “A teacher referred to me (and others) as “you people.” “A White professor made ebonics jokes in front of me.” One woman wrote:

There were a number of times in my classes that I felt as if certain comments or conversations were directed my way because I was the only Black person. One class in particular, a student was giving a presentation about the role of welfare on society and stated that because of Black people, the state of Alabama was in dire straights. Cities were in states of confusion because “over 90% of the Blacks in the state were on welfare.” When I asked where she obtained her information, she became defensive, and she said she did not need to back up her statements with facts because it was the truth and just look at the news. The professor just sat back and allowed the conversation. I later heard, from a friend of mine in the program, that he thought I was antagonizing the student and didn’t allow her to speak her mind, even though she was shouting and crying, as I sat back and listened and displayed a great deal of poise.

One woman wrote, in part, “There’s not enough room in this box to contain the answer to this question.” “I got use to being referred to as an “at-risk” student.” “My colleagues were concerned that I was “too intense” and too much about race. My body language seemed hostile. An African American woman student warned me that it didn’t pay to be “too black.”

**Intellectual acuity.** Eight percent of the respondents reported that the professor of their cohorts’ perceived projection of the respondent’s lack of intellectual acuity as directly attributed to their race.

**Intra-racism.** Less than one percent of the respondents experienced intra-racism. One respondent described the inequity, and sometimes, vitriolic relationship she had with a Black female advisor. She wrote:

Sometimes Black women can be threatened and competitive. The most memorable story was the time she called me to campus to hand deliver some data I collected (as opposed to sending it electronically). I was around 6-7 months pregnant, and I was working from home. That day, I was having a bad reaction to too much sodium...every joint and my feet were swollen uncomfortably. I couldn't wear any shoes. When she asked me to return to campus, I explained my situation. She didn't care. [She] said 'come anyway'. I dressed in all black, including black socks and black Isotoner slip-ons. When I arrived at her office, she looked [me up and down], closed the door and turned around, holding her two index fingers in the form of an "X." She got in my face with her "X" and said, "Women like you are what give the rest of us a bad name...you are the reason we are not taken seriously in the academy...how dare you show up in this building with house shoes! Where I come from...where I studied, you'd have a mark on your head...you'd be tabooed." The respondent went on to write, "She was ten years my senior, medically obese an extremely dark complexion. She had a short, thinning, natural. She was married and pregnant while in graduate school; however, she had a miscarriage, and her husband later left her. I am not obese, have light complexion; long, thick hair, was married, had one child and had another on the way.

**Isolation.** Two percent of respondents expressed feelings of isolation during their graduate studies. One woman wrote, "feeling academically and socially isolated is directly

related to being one of a handful (and that is even an exaggeration) of Black students in my department.” “I have experienced a more benign kind of neglect, as well as, a lack of recognition for the difficulties associated with working twice as hard, without the same kinds of connections and networks as my white counterparts.”

**No response.** Twelve respondents reported that they either did not have an experience that they could directly attribute to their race or what they wrote did not respond to the question. For example, some wrote, “I’m in an on-line program.” “Nothing significant comes to mind, which I attribute to the TREMENDOUS emphasis on culture awareness and sensitivity.” “I’m sure there have been those experiences but because my doctoral program is in area studies, it’s actually a bit harder for me to perceive.” “I say ‘no’ because I would attribute most experiences to being a woman in a male dominated field.” “Cannot say for sure any experiences were attributed to race since [I] was never told directly.” Fifty-two of them did not respond to this item. The results can be found in Table 9.

Table 9

<i>Experiences Attributed to Race Categories</i>		
Response	Number	Percentage
Funding	4	3.9
Insensitivity	20	19.6
Intellectual acuity	8	7.8
Intra-racism	1	.9
Isolation	2	1.9
No Response	67	65.7
Total	102	100

**Resident expert.** Over 50% of the participants responded that cohorts and faculty expected them to be resident experts on the Black experience and/or culture. Fifty-three of the participants answered affirmatively when asked if they were viewed as a resident expert on the

Black experience/Black culture. Forty-five participants had not had that experience, and four participants did not respond. The results can be found in Table 10.

Table 10

*Resident Expert on the Black Experience*

Response	Number	Percentage
Yes	53	52.0
No	45	44.1
No Response	4	3.9
Total	102	100.0

Forty-nine of the participants provided a narrative to the open-ended question that asked them to describe their experience. Three primary categories emerged from the narrative responses. Those respondents who expressed neutrality in being perceived as a resident expert on Black culture and experiences were categorized as “No Problem”. Women who indicated that there was a tacit expectation that they were resident experts, and they embraced it, were categorized as “Expected”. If the respondents offered a narrative, but the researcher could not discern their position on the question, they were categorized as “Unresponsive”.

Some of the narrative response under the “Expected” category included, “In a conversation about public assistance, all eyes turned to me as if I had personal knowledge on the issue.” “All persons who are not of the dominant group are thought to be experts for that group.” “Does that really need an explanation?!” “White, male, professor wanted me to address white students’ questions, and anger about how they felt, not wanting to be called racist.” “I was the only Black in my group of eleven doctoral students. I was expected to explain all black-related business issues.”

Some of the narrative response under “No Problem” included, “I was happy to share my experiences about my culture and experiences.” “I was on a mission to educate mis-education



whenever possible. I would not allow racist or mis-information to proliferate as scholarly information.” ”I am always the token someone.”

Eight participants were coded as “No Problem”; 30 as “Expected”, 11 as “Unresponsive” and 53 did not respond to the question.

Table 11

*Resident Expert on the Black Experience Coding Categories*

Response	Number	Percentage
No Problem	8	7.8
Expected	30	29.4
Unresponsive	11	10.8
No Response	53	
Total	102	100.0

**Relationship with classmates.** In trying to discern the participants’ educational experiences, one of the survey questions that the researcher included asked about the respondents’ relationships with their classmates. Ninety-four participants responded to this question. The researcher grouped them into four primary categories: “Good,” “Distant,” “Collegial” and “Antagonistic.” Over 50% of the respondents reported they had good relationships with their classmates. If the participants indicated that their relationships were good, friendly, or long lasting, they were coded as “good”. Some of their comments included, “My cohort was amazing.” “Very close, excellent support, biggest support system, no competition.” “It was a fantastic union of brilliant people.” One participant wrote a very comprehensive response; she wrote:

We were a cohort of well-read, zealous, young, professionals scholars who were in our particular program for vey specific reasons related to our goals and objectives to be movers and shakers for advancing the right[s], privileges, and cultural

empowerment of people of African descent worldwide. We debated regularly, and shared texts and ideas that advanced the growth of the group.

Fifteen percent of the participants stated that their relationships with their classmates could be described as distant, but friendly. Some of their comments included, “distant,” “Although my classmates were well-meaning and polite, I never felt close or connected with them.” “Distant, but friendly.” “It’s strictly professional, if it exists at all.” “Distant but amicable.”

Twenty-two percent of the participants had a collegial relationship with their classmates. Most described it as professional, not a friendship. The narrative responses included, “My relationships were mostly cordial.” “Casual and oftentimes cool.” “A few were receptive and engaging, sometimes overly polite.” “Cordial and sometimes guarded.” “Cordial, mostly superficial”.

Five percent of the respondents described having an antagonistic relationship with their classmates. Some of their comments included, “some were actively hostile or dismissive.” “I did not have a good relationship with my classmates. I learned very quickly to be closed-mouthed about my work and successes.” “It was difficult because the department created an environment of sheer competition, so there was not a lot of camaraderie.” The results can be found in the table below.

Fifteen percent of the respondents described their relationship with their classmates as distant. Some of the narrative responses included, “Many of [my] classmates who considered themselves to be academically superior did not have much to do with me, whom they considered less capable.” “Some classmates would not speak until they needed help on class

notes/assignments or chemicals for research”. I associate with other students while I am at school, but do not socialize with any of them outside of school. “ One respondent shared:

Some were very sneaky. For instance, I called one up to go and study with me, and she didn’t want to. I go to the library and there she is working on the assignment. I guess she was too independent and selfish to work on the assignment with me.

Eight percent of the respondents did not respond to this item.

Table 12

*Relationship with Classmates*

Category	Number	Percentage
Good	52	51.0
Distant	15	14.7
Antagonistic	5	4.9
Collegial	22	21.6
No Response	8	7.8
Total	102	100.0

**Black scholarship.** Forty-nine percent of the participants had read and/or discussed five or more Black scholars during their core course work. Twenty-two percent of the respondents had read or discussed 2-4 Black scholars during their coursework. Fifty percent of the respondents had read or discussed five or more Black scholars, and 20% did not respond to this item.. The results can be found in Table 13.

Table 13

*Black Scholars Read and/or Discussed*

Number	Number	Percentage
0		0
1-2	22	21.5
3-4	10	0.9
5 or more	50	49.0
No Response	20	19.6
Total	102	100.0

**Courses taught by Black faculty.** Ninety-six respondents answered this item. Twenty-nine percent of them indicated that Black faculty had not taught the graduate courses. Forty percent indicated that Black faculty taught 1-2 courses. Twenty-one percent had 3-4 courses with Black faculty, and 12% had five or more courses with Black faculty.

Table 14

*Black Faculty Teaching Graduate Courses*

Number	Number	Percentage
0	28	27.5
1-2	39	38.2
3-4	20	19.6
5 or more	11	10.8
No Response	4	3.9
Total	102	100.0

**Black faculty in the department.** Ninety-six respondents answered this question. Twenty-nine percent reported having no Black faculty in their department. Thirty-eight percent had 1-2 Black faculty, 19% had 3-4 and 15% had more than 5 Black faculty in their departments.

Table 15

*Black Faculty in the Department*

Number	Number	Percentage
0	28	27.5
1-2	37	36.3
3-4	19	18.6
5 or more	14	13.7
No Response	4	3.9
Total	102	100.0

**Mentors.** Sixty-two percent of the respondents reported having a mentor. The results were reflected in Table 16.

Table 16

*Mentors*

Mentor	Number	Percentage
Yes	63	61.8
No	36	35.3
No Response	3	2.9
Total	102	100.0

Only 74% of the participants responded to the open-ended question that asked them to describe their mentor. The racial background of the mentors was illustrated in Table 17. The narrative responses to the open-ended question follow.

Table 17

*Mentors Racial and Gender Identity*

Race/Gender	Number	Percentage
African American Female	22	21.6
African American Male	11	10.8
White Female	23	22.5
White Male	15	14.7
Hispanic Female	3	2.9
Asian Female	3	2.9
Asian Male	3	2.9
Indian	1	.9
Multiple Mentors	10	9.8
No Response	11	10.8
Total	102	100.0

For the most part, the participants had very good relationships with their mentors. Some of their comments included, “She’s fantastic, always available.” “my intellectual mother,” “respectful,” “simply amazing,” “I have an excellent relationship with my mentor.” One respondent wrote, “They were nurturing, honest, and supportive; and although there were times I did not agree or want to hear what they had to say, I listened. I was at their houses, in their offices, and sitting on their sofas sipping tea on Saturday mornings.”

A narrative response from a woman who did not have a good relationship with her mentors said, “The Black male, unfortunately, was the least helpful. It’s depressing how we keep each other down sometimes.” Two of the more comprehensive responses follow:

Relationship started out well but ended terribly. I was on track to complete my program in six years. Instead it took me ten years. I never received any support when I tried to complain about my advisor. I would never go into academia because of the terrible experience I had.

Another respondent wrote:

I did not feel that she felt particularly responsible to me as a mentor. She expected me to go it alone for the most part, but [she] was also extremely critical. The relationship was not outright antagonistic, but did leave me wanting.

**Conflicting response from the African American community.** The researcher asked two dichotomous questions to glean whether the participants were supported by their immediate families and communities, and if their families and communities understood their doctoral pursuit. The first question asked the respondents if their families and/or communities supported their doctoral pursuit. Ninety-five women responded to the item. Ninety-six percent of them answered affirmatively to that item. The researcher also asked if their families/community understood their doctoral pursuit. Ninety-seven women answered this item. Sixty percent of them answered affirmatively.

Table 18

*Immediate Family Support*

Support	Number	Percentage
Yes	92	90.2
No	4	3.9
No Response	6	5.9
Total	102	100.0

Table 19

*Immediate Family Understanding*

Understand	Number	Percentage
Yes	61	59.8
No	38	37.3
No Response	3	2.9
Total	102	100.0

**Afrocentricity**

Afrocentricity compelled the researcher, scholar and/or student to center African phenomenon and agency (Asante, 2002). It was a methodological tool that required the scholar to question, interrogate, and analyze the source or location of the data. This methodological tool prohibited the researcher from analyzing the data or discerning conclusions that were developed through a deficit model. Moreover, it encouraged the user to engage with the counternarrative while simultaneously critiquing and examining traditional, reifying, ways of knowing. Afrocentricity elucidated the importance of disclosing and embracing its centeredness. It did not presume objectivity. In fact, it rejected it; however, it required the researcher/scholar to fully disclose the centeredness of his or her position. Afrocentricity embodied this movement.

Each respondent was asked to self report whether she considered herself to be Afrocentric. It was a dichotomous question and no additional information was provided. Ninety-eight of the 102 respondents answered the question. Of the 98 respondents, 63% of them responded affirmatively.

Table 20

*Afrocentricity Self Report*

Response	Number	Percentage
Yes	64	62.7
No	34	33.3
No Response	4	3.9
Total	102	100.0

The follow-up question was open-ended and it asked the respondents to provide two examples that best demonstrated their understanding of Afrocentricity. Eighty-five of the respondents provided examples that best described their understanding of Afrocentricity. Eleven percent of those respondents wrote that Afrocentricity had something to do with a woman wearing a natural hairstyle. The narrative responses included: “I have always worn my hair in braids.” “I wear natural hair on purpose.” “I wear my hair natural.” “Feeling totally comfortable wearing my natural hair.” “I have natural hair (I get it pressed sometimes) but I do not try to perm my hair to look like some idealized model.” “In no way do I attempt to perform beauty according to a western aesthetic, but rather I embrace my uniquely *Negro* (italics mine) features.”

Two percent of the respondents believed that Afrocentricity was Maulana Karenga’s Kwanzaa. Karenga (1998) created Kwanza to reaffirm and restore African heritage and culture. Since they only wrote the word, “Kwanzaa”, it was impossible to discern if they were talking about the seven day Kwanzaa celebration or the embodiment of Kwanzaa as a living principle. It may be safe to assume that they were not suggesting it could be used as a methodological tool.

Four percent of the respondents thought Afrocentricity was wearing African clothes. Some of the comments included: “wearing traditional African clothing.” “African clothing.” “I oftentimes wear jewelry and clothing that reflect my African heritage.”

Two percent of the respondents believed that Afrocentricity was synonymous with Afrocentricism. Some of their responses were: “I have seen scholars believe that nothing good comes from Anglo culture in the same way that many Anglo scholars believe that nothing good comes from Afrocentricity. Both are problematic.” “While Afrocentricism forms part of the foundation of my thinking, I’m influenced more by postcolonial, Creole, and border studies.”



Eleven percent of the respondents believed that one had to actually travel to Africa or be cognizant of current African events and affairs to be Afrocentric. This category was coded as “African culture.” One wrote, “Knowing what’s going on in the news with countries on the African continent such as Kenya, South Africa and the Sudan.” “It is a Pan-Africanist notion and I often think people get it wrong. Sometimes they have never traveled to Africa, nor do they keep up to date with contemporary issues occurring on the continent. This had made it difficult for me to take many Afrocentric people seriously.” “One can be Afrocentric if they’re knowledgeable of current events as it relates to countries in Africa.” “We disaggregate the African continent to exhibit knowledge, or at least awareness, of all its 50 plus sub-Saharan countries.” “I have traveled to and lived in Africa in order to understand better our heritage.”

Twenty-seven percent of the respondents described Afrocentricity by referencing M. Asante, who developed Afrocentricity, or they included references to pride, history, community, spirituality and scholarship. Their comments included, “Afrocentricity is when you place black experience, culture, and people at the center of all decision[s] you make.” “Connecting to African ancestry and instilling a pride, a passion that uplifts and connects with all people.” “Placing one's African characteristics and values at the center of one's beliefs, existence, or view point.” “I would define it as when an individual places their African heritage or culture at the center of the everyday lives and activities.” “Worldview/practice/academic standpoint popularized by M. Asante, characterized by its focus on the African (psychological/cultural/spiritual) referent that is said to join/link/ground black people worldwide.”

Ten percent of the respondents described Afrocentricity aesthetically. Some of their responses included: “My home, my attire, and my energy all reflect my African roots”. “African

clothing.” “I have African artifacts that decorate my home and oftentimes wear jewelry, clothing and hairstyles that reflect my African heritage.”

Ten participants describe Afrocentricity as dealing with the Black experience. Their responses included, “Black in appearance.” “Outlook on the world through the Black experience.” “Black power ideology of the 1960’s.”

Twelve respondents did not directly respond to the question. Their responses were coded as “No Discernible Response.” Some of the narrative responses included: “Not quite sure what you’re looking for with this question.” “Clarity please.” “I do not really know nor have I researched Afrocentricity.” Seventeen percent of respondents did not respond to this item.

Table 21

*Afrocentricity Descriptions*

Response	Number	Percentage
Hair	9	8.8
Kwanzaa	2	1.9
Clothing	4	3.9
Afrocentricism	2	1.9
African Culture	8	7.8
Afrocentricity	27	26.5
Aesthetics	11	10.7
Black Experience	10	9.8
No Discernible Response	12	11.7
No Response	17	16.6
Total	102	100.0

## Summary

One hundred and two women responded to the on-line survey. More than 50% of the participants had earned the terminal degree. The majority of them (54) were between the ages of 31-40 and more than 50% of them started their doctoral programs within the last ten years. More than 80% of the participants racially identified as either African American or Black. Ninety-three percent of the participants experienced some success in their doctoral pursuit, and of the 68

participants who provided a narrative response that described their success, 23 of them ascribed their success to earning the terminal degree.

The survey questions were specifically structured to respond to four primary issues that resonated in the literature, including, experience that they could directly attribute to their race, resident expert, lack of African American faculty and scholarship and a conflicting response from the African American community. Fifty-two women reported having an experience that they could directly attribute to their race. Twenty of those women ascribed the experience to insensitivity on the part of faculty and their classmates. Fifty-two of the women reported having good or collegial relationships with their classmates. Eight respondents ascribed it to intellectual acuity, four to funding, one to intra-racism, two to isolation and 67 women did not respond to this item.

Fifty-two percent of the participants were viewed as a resident expert on the Black culture or Black experience by their classmates. Forty-nine percent of the women had read and/or discussed five or more Black scholars during their coursework. Sixty-two percent of them reported having a mentor. The participants' mentors were predominately women: 22% African American, 23% White, 3% Hispanic and 3% Asian.

Sixty-three percent of the women self-reported to be Afrocentric. When asked to provide examples of Afrocentricity, 26% of them used aesthetic terms, such as, natural hair styles, African clothing and jewelry. Eight percent of them ascribed Afrocentricity to African culture. More than 25% of them provided examples that aligned with the tenets of Afrocentricity and provided specific information about the founder, Molefi Asante.

What do the quantitative data tell those in the academy about the educational experiences of Black women? What can be learned from this data that will assist Black women in being

successful in their doctoral studies? What can be gleaned about the impact on Afrocentric sensibilities on Black women's doctoral experience? The researcher discussed each category independently, analyzing how the quantitative data assists the researcher in answering the three research questions.

### **What Do The Voices Tell Us?**

The researcher discussed what Black women called themselves and how the respondents experienced success. Black women's educational experiences were explored, including the subcategories of whether respondents had experiences that they could directly attribute to race and if they were viewed as a resident expert. This discussion included a discussion on mentoring, including did they have a mentor and what they thought about their mentor; the number of courses the participants took taught by Black faculty, the number of Black faculty in the participants' departments, the conflicting response from family and/or community. This discussion will conclude with a discussion of Afrocentricity.

### **Racial Identity**

One of the most interesting statistic was how the participants self-reported their race. It was an open-ended question, so the respondents had considerable latitude to articulate their preference. The numbers were interesting because a majority of the women expounded on, or moved well beyond, the government sanctioned racial categories.

In "African to African American," Smitherman (1999) chronicled the history of racial categories used to describe phenotypically Black people. The first Africans brought to the colonies are called "African." They were further distinguished by their condition: 'free' of enslaved.' By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, several generations of Blacks were born on American soil and there were fewer shipments of African cargo. African was supplanted by the term "Colored." At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Black leaders were attempting to foster a new identity that

incorporated full citizenship and to put some distance between the Holocaust of slavery and its collateral damage. They opted to use Negro. By the late 1960s, Black activist and leader, Stokeley Carmichael, called for Black Power. In other words, as Langston Hughes articulated some sixty years before, Black people were going to define themselves, no matter what anyone said. There was a distinct and discernible shift to abandon the “slavery imposed name,” repudiated whiteness, and rejected assimilation (Smitherman, 1999, p. 47). Phenotypically African people were now called Black. In the 1980s, there was yet another ideological shift for Blacks to identify with their two selves: African and American. This was a conscious effort to forge an allegiance to Mother Africa and to link Black people to America. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Black and African American were often used interchangeably.

The majority of the participants (96) opted to be called African American, Black, or both. The researcher could not glean a lot from the empirical data; however, the narrative responses to the dichotomous data confirmed that the Black community still continued to struggle with what to call themselves. They may struggle, but it was clear that the participants seized the opportunity to be the arbiter of that name, and they pronounce their choice with steadfastness and confidence.

## **Success**

The majority of the respondents had experienced success. Only four women had not experienced success and three women did not respond to the question. When the narrative responses were coded, twenty-three percent of the women indicated that they were successful because they had earned the degree. Eleven percent of them attributed their success to the relationship they had with their mentors and nine percent ascribed it to the funding they had received. The top three categories were important to those entering the junior tenure track process (Nettles & Millett, 2006).

## **Educational Experiences**

**Experiences directly attributed to race.** The researcher was interested in discerning the participants' educational experiences. The literature purported that because Black women lacked cultural capital in doctoral programs, they had experiences that could be directly attributed to their race (Howard-Vital, 1989). Half of the women had such an experience. When the respondents were asked to describe their experiences, they reported that faculty and classmates were insensitive (Carter, 2003; Carter, 2008; Duckworth-Warner, 2003).

Participants described faculty as allowing White cohorts to make disparaging remarks about Black people without credible evidence to support their assertions, thereby reifying White hegemony. One participant said she got used to be referred to as an "at-risk student". Eight students ascribed their experience to being perceived as lacking intellectual acuity. Funding, intra-racism, and isolation Generally, classroom dynamics were described as Black students being the token one in the classroom (Graham, 2003; Johnson, 2003; Peters, 2003). Black graduate students noted that generally they were invisible in the classroom unless the topic was about Blacks. Black students were also perceived as resident experts in the classroom.

**Resident expert.** Half the participants indicated that they were viewed as a resident expert on the Black experience and Black culture in the classroom by faculty and cohorts (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Graham, 2003; Johnson, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2005b; Peters, 2003). Often most of the students wanted the lone Black student to be the resident expert on black culture, as if Blacks were a monolithic group for which that lone Black student could speak to every issue.

The respondents, who expressed neutrality, typically did not express any concerns with being perceived as a resident expert. These participants, for the most part, welcomed the

opportunity to supplement their cohorts' understanding of Black people. Some of the participants expect to be perceived as resident experts because they lack cultural capital.

**Black scholarship and faculty.** Forty-nine percent of the respondents indicated that they had read and/or discussed five or more Black scholars during their coursework. It appeared that all of the participants had read at least one Black scholar. Sixty-nine percent of the respondents had taken at least one course with a Black faculty. The participants responses; however, confirm what the literature suggested, there is a paucity of Black tenured faculty (Cushinberry, 2003; Duckworth-Warner, 2003; Hopp et al., 2003; Rentz, 2003). Twenty-eight percent of the respondents did not have any Black faculty in their department. Thirty-seven percent had 1-2, 19% had 3-4, 14% had five or more.

**Mentors.** The literature confirmed that few African American doctoral students have mentors, and those who do, secure mentors outside their respective departments (Garrett, 2006; Hopp et al., 2003; Peters, 2003; Thompson & Louque, 2005). It also illuminated the importance of mentors to the success of African Americans students. More than half of the respondents reported having a mentor. The narrative responses confirm that the respondents had good relationships with their mentors. The mentors were described as “supportive,” “nurturing,” and “amazing.” One participant described her mentor as not supportive. Another described her mentor as glaringly absent, “but [she] was also very critical.” The empirical data confirms the importance of mentoring.

The literature also purported that African American received a conflicting response from their families and/or the African American community (Fries-Britt & Turner-Kelly, 2005; Gay, 2000; Malveaux, 1996). While 92% of the respondents indicated that they received support, almost 40% of them did not understand the doctoral pursuit. These were dichotomous questions.

It would have been helpful to ask an open-ended question to discern how the respondents interpreted this question.

**Afrocentricity.** Early African American scholars used tenets of Afrocentricity as early as the 1800s (Karenga, 2002). Frederick Douglass (2004), David Walker (2004), Maria Stewart (2004), Anna Julia Cooper (2004), just to name a few, are all very clear about their African centeredness. Their arguments are premised upon the intellectual proposition that African culture has a key role in understanding society and human experience. The best way to understand African people is from their own perspective (Karenga, 2002).

As Smitherman (1999) chronicled the history of what Blacks were called in this country, she also spent some time critiquing the socio-historical dynamics of the 1970s. It was an interesting period because it was post segregation, and Black people were ostensibly embracing African culture and pride. Blacks were asserting their right to define their own distinct culture and to name themselves. Songs, such as James Brown's "Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud", celebrated Black pride. Black people were dictating bold fashion styles and natural hairstyles, such as Afros or cornrows. This historical perspective offered a rationale for some of the seemingly superficial responses that follow, including, "it [Afrocentricity] is a hairstyle", what you wear or where you travel, etc.

Twenty-four percent of the respondents described Afrocentricity in aesthetic terms, for example, hair, clothes and the Western aesthetic. Twenty-seven percent of them described Afrocentricity in the terms used to develop the Afrocentric rubric, such as pride, supporting a research agenda that serves Black people, giving back to the community, history, harmony, and social justice. Two participants used the term Afrocentricism as if it were synonymous with Afrocentricity. Cornel West (2003) asserts that Afrocentricism is a misguided attempt to define



an African identity within a hostile, white space. He suggests that it is misguided because it is silent on class, sexism, and homophobia (p. 7). Karenga (2002) states “the use of “ism” tends to suggest that it is seen as more of a political posture than a methodology or centeredness of intellectual work” (p. 16). The disparity between Afrocentricity and Afrocentricism was illuminated when Eurocentricism was defined. Karenga writes, “Eurocentricism is an ideology and practice of domination and exclusion based on the fundamental assumption that all relevance and value are centered in Europe culture and peoples and that all other cultures and peoples are at best marginal and at worse irrelevant” (pp. 16-17). Many scholars, when defining Afrocentricism, simply supplant its name for Eurocentricism. Afrocentricity was not a practice of domination nor did it exclude; rather, it was transparent in its disclosure of centeredness to African agency and phenomenon. It invited critique, interrogation, and rigorous analysis. African subjects were active participants in history.

The quantitative findings, on its face, in some cases, do not align with the narrative posited in the literature review. For example, the literature suggests that a majority of Black, female graduate students do not have mentors; however, 62% of the participants of this study purported to have a mentor. Because of African American faculty’s lack of cultural capital, few graduate students experience being taught by African American faculty. In this study, 69% of these participants reported having a class with African American faculty, and 11% of them reported taking five or more classes with African American faculty. The literature review suggests that graduate students get little exposure to Black scholarship during their studies; however, in this study 80% of the respondents reported being exposed to Black scholarship. The qualitative findings illuminate these glaring irregularities and confirm the veracity of qualitative inquiry.

## **Chapter Five: Qualitative Findings**

Richardson (1997) asserts that qualitative work, unlike quantitative work whose meaning is illustrated in tables and summaries, must be read to discern its meaning. “Its meaning is in the reading” (p. 87). Qualitative work has the potential to reach a wide and diverse audience. As Richardson asserts, “I write because I want to find something out. I write in order to learn something that I didn’t know before I wrote it” (p. 87). The researcher embraces Richardson’s assertion. Qualitative work, by its very nature, must be read to discern the analysis. This researcher yearned to learn something that was not known before this study began.

### **Narrative**

Polkinghorne (1988) offers a dialogue about the importance of narrative. He suggests that narrative helps the reader understand our past lives and plan our future. It gives meaning to one’s personal actions and temporality. He goes further and says, “Our lives are ceaselessly intertwined with narrative, with the stories that we tell and hear told, with the stories we dream or imagine or would like to tell” (p. 160). We routinely engage in stories to articulate our life experiences. Polkinghorne also suggests that narratives are different from chronicles, which chronologically list events; rather narratives “provide a symbolized account of actions that includes a temporal dimension” (p. 18).

Chase (2005) writes that a narrative can be oral or written. It can be elicited during an interview or a conversation. A narrative may be a short topical story about a particular event or it may be an extended story about a significant aspect of one’s life. Chase also says narratives are important because they allow the teller to inform the reader why what was being told was important. “Narratives express emotions, thoughts and interpretations” (p. 656). Most importantly, “narrators explain, entertain, inform, defend, complain, and confirm or challenge

the status quo” (p. 657). Narrative analysis has the potential to implode the master narrative and invites the counternarrative.

The researcher chose a narrative style to articulate the participants’ stories. An African proverb admonishes readers that the story about the hunt would be very different if it were told by the hunted, rather than the hunter. The researcher heeded the ancient African griot as the participants told their stories in their own words.

When Harriet Beecher Stowe (1852) wrote about the travails of the American slave, slavery was perceived as a benevolent institution. When Frederick Douglass (2004) recounted his life with the unscrupulous Mrs. Auld and the villainous Mr. Covey and Harriet Jacobs (1987) gave voice to the sexual harassment of young, black, slave girls, as told through her depiction of the lasciviousness Dr. Flint, their stories were remarkably different from Stowe’s. While these texts gave voice to their real-life experiences, they still move the reader over 200 years later. Therein lies the value of telling each story, using the voice, the words, and the raw emotions of the teller, the participant.

Narrative analysis allowed the researcher to articulate the participants’ stories. Gudmundsdottir (1995) says, “Narratives allow us to discover new meanings by assimilating experiences into a narrative schema” (p. 34). He further suggests that narratives were valuable transformative tools. “Narratives allow us to ascribe new meanings to our world and help us communicate new ideas to others” (p. 34).

Karenga (2002) explains that in the 1960’s, after a decade of struggle, including church bombings, lynchings, African Americans being thrown in jails, bitten by dogs, terrorized by police and the KKK, the subjects of this terror reaffirmed their Africanness and the social justice tradition. Inclusive in this reaffirmation was reflexivity, looking back to understand the

historical past, embracing and acknowledging the resistance, perseverance, and tenacity of the ancestors to continue to march forward. Nommo, taken from the creation narrative of the Dogon people of Mali, is loosely translated as “the word.” It evolved out of the 1960’s Black Movement (Karenga, 2002). African Americans asserted their right to name and speak for themselves. Karenga writes, “It is this sacred, indispensable, and creative character of the word, as an inherent and instrumental power to call into being, to mold, to bear infinite meanings, and to forge a world we all want and deserve to live in”

(p. 8). Likewise, in the case of this research, the African American, female participants actively resisted any imposition of inferiority, characterizations of weakness or second-class citizenship, and efforts to marginalize or silence them. With bold, audacious, courage, they shared their life experiences, their pain, anger, sadness, frustration, laughter, joy and triumph with the researcher.

### **Validity**

To ensure interpretive and theoretical validity, the researcher utilized methodological triangulation (Mason, 2006). Quantitative and qualitative methods were used. If similar conclusions were found, validity was evident (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Mason, 2006). In addition, the researcher maintained a methodological log, copies of all correspondence, including email messages, to and from the participants, all digital audio recordings, transcriptions of the audio recordings, and researcher field notes (Mason, 2006).

### **Introduction to the Narratives**

The following descriptive stories of the nineteen participants were transcribed from the interview; their words, in most cases, were used verbatim. The researcher took the liberty to delete nervous or redundant words, such as “like,” “kind of,” “right,” and “you know.” In some cases, the researcher changed the tense, and punctuation was added or deleted for fluidity of the

story only. Unless otherwise noted, the stories were told by the tellers with minimal interjection from the researcher.

## **Analysis**

The audio recordings were transcribed by a professional service. The researcher reviewed each transcript. In addition, each transcription was forwarded to each participant to review, comment, and/or delete any data contained therein. Initially, the researcher utilized an open coding procedure. Lindof and Taylor (2002) write that open coding is performed before categories are known. “It is a creative act” (216). They suggested that coding helped the researcher “locate revealing moments in talk, stories and other verbal texts” (Lindof & Taylor, 2002, p. 217). The researcher began with three categories that aligned with the research questions: “Success,” “Educational Experiences,” and “Afrocentricity.” The researcher coded the data and the following categories emerged: “Mentorship,” including subcategories: “Intellectual Growth” and “Collaborative Relationships;” “Sisterhood Connections,” including “Writing Groups” and “Researcher Support;” and “Black Female Body,” including “Angry Black Female” and “Happy to be Nappy: Black Hair.” Afrocentricity will be analyzed and discussed in Chapter Six. As strategies of success were examined, the researcher noted that all the participants were on a terminal pursuit. As long as they continued the journey, all of the stories fell under the broad category of “Terminal Pursuit.”

The researcher used a narrative style to illuminate and explicate the participants’ lived experiences. The participants’ stories and the researcher’s analyses can be instructive for African American women in the academic pipeline, faculty who work with doctoral students, and those African American women who are actively pursuing their doctorate. The researcher initiated the discussion of each category with a brief vignette from one of the participants that best illustrated that particular category. The participants’ words were denoted in italics. Following the vignette,

the researcher juxtaposed analysis with the participants' stories to address the three research questions:

1. What are the educational experiences of African American women in doctoral programs?
2. What strategies do African American women utilize to be successful in doctoral programs?
3. Do Afrocentric sensibilities impact African American female doctoral students as they complete their graduate work? And if so, how?

### **The Terminal Pursuit**

One who is on a terminal pursuit is one who continues until the goal is fulfilled. In fact, Hawley (1993) states those who do not satisfy the requirements of the doctoral degree within the proscribed time would abandon any future attempts to finish it. This researcher sought to understand, in part, strategies African American women used to be successful in their doctoral studies. To understand these strategies of success, the researcher also examined the participants' educational experiences. Success was defined as the favorable or prosperous termination of attempts or endeavors. In other words, the goal was achieved with favorable results. Eighteen of the nineteen participants had experienced success in their doctoral studies and responded affirmatively when asked about the terminal pursuit. Only one participant indicated that she had not experienced success. Those who experienced success persisted after their goal in spite of obstacles. Alex Hitchens, a memorable character in the 2005 movie "Hitch," defined persistence as "continuing in a course of action without regard to discouragement, opposition, or previous failure." One who was persistent embodied tenacious determination and purpose. She did not give up, in spite of challenges, obstacles, setbacks, and defeats.

Many participants shared that they did not experience institutional support or mentoring from the faculty. The vignette that follows articulates Harriet's experience trying to successfully navigate graduate school requirements without institutional support or mentoring:

I went immediately into the PhD, and I didn't research the program. I'm first generation at every level, undergrad, Masters, and Ph.D. It didn't occur to me to really research and find a program that fits my philosophy. I didn't research the people. I chose my program because it was within driving distance. It was a state school, so I could afford it. I wouldn't have to move. I was actually teaching while simultaneously doing my Ph.D. I went there and it seemed to be going well. I'm a straightforward person. I'm someone who has had to make my own way in the world, so it's not like I was looking for people to coddle me or lead me around. I wasn't getting mentored which I know now is supposed to be happening. My advisor was just assigned to me basically. They said it was based on what we wrote, but as I found out more about the program, it was basically they just gave people to people. My original advisor actually left the university. I was left on my own to find someone during my coursework (Harriet).

## **Mentorship**

Few participants had a mentor during their doctoral studies. The literature; however, indicates the importance of mentorship to a graduate student's success (Collins, 2001; Hopp et al., 2003; Peters, 2003; Thompson & Louque, 2005; Williams, 2001). Few qualitative studies specifically detailed graduate students' relationships with their dissertation committee members (Pinkett, 2003). The literature confirms that few graduate students had mentors (Garrett, 2006; Hopp et al., 2003; Peters, 2003; Thompson & Louque, 2005). Those graduate student participants who did not benefit from a mentoring relationship had to be self-motivated. They

had to be assertive enough to discern how to get things done on their own. Octavia was one such person. She detailed needing to be self-motivated in order to progress in her program. The researcher will discuss Octavia's experiences in more detail later in this chapter. A majority of the participants in this study were not mentored. They had unfavorable experiences with members of their dissertation committee. They had to quickly learn a democratic and expedient way to mediate any problems so their tenure in the program was not unnecessarily prolonged. Faith was one such participant. She would not acquiesce to her advisor's suggestions and later endured what many would perceive as retaliation during her qualifying examination. Faith's experiences are discussed in greater detail later in this chapter. As the researcher reflected on some of the literature, one passage emerged: "One well published, dignified old-timer declared that he had gone through bloody hell writing the dissertation and wasn't about to hold any student's hand. Besides," he added, "a little suffering is good for them" (Hawley, 1993, p. 25). The old timer's words give voice to some tenured faculty's reluctance to assist graduate students because they had had an unpleasant doctoral experience. Tenured faculty may not offer meaningful mentoring relationships because they have not experienced them. The participants in this study struggled in their doctoral journey at some point, and all but one survived it. Because of the struggle, they were all stronger, even the one who did not experience success. Each of the following stories illuminates strategies Black women can use to be successful in their doctoral pursuit. Three participants discussed dissertation committees that were not supportive.

**Harriet.** Harriet's experience encapsulated the experience of the majority of the participants. Many of them were first-generation graduate students, as was Harriet. Many had to forge an untraveled path, with very little mentoring. Harriet said, "I wasn't getting mentored which I know now is supposed to happen." As Harriet's story unfolded, she described



encountering many obstacles, but she did not give up. She quit one doctoral program and got into another. She epitomized persistence. She questioned, embodied silence, and observed, but she kept moving forward. Harriet provided some insight on the qualifying examination process at her university. She said:

I completed my coursework, and in all my courses I talked about Paulo Friere's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. I incorporated social justice into my work. All the writings I did for classes, I talked about social justice and tried to incorporate it. I never got any feedback on my work, but I got A's in the classes. When it was time for qualifying exams, they wanted me to know all of this stuff that we never talked about in class. I had to basically teach myself the [seminal work]. No one ever said, 'you need to have this foundation because that's what you're going to be tested on'. I had a working knowledge of the foundation but I certainly couldn't spit out essays in depth about it.

Harriet attempted and failed the qualifying exam twice. She sought the advice and support of her advisor after each failure. Her advisor offered no assistance. In fact, as Harriet recalled, "I tried to speak with her. She didn't respond at all. She didn't speak to me period. In fact, we haven't spoken (laugh) since then." Duckworth-Warner (2003) describes the "How-to Mentor." This type of mentor should show students the ropes and articulate the rules of the game. Harriet could have benefitted from this type of mentor.

A mentor serves in the same capacity as a master teacher who designs a program to instruct his/her initiate in everything he or she knows. In doctoral programs that transmission of knowledge should include consistent dialogue; direction and advice on coursework; assistance with qualifying examinations; publishing opportunities; conference attendance and participation;

and help with research interests, dissertation topics, and timelines (Cushinberry, 2003; Duckworth-Warner, 2003; Hopp et al., 2003; Rentz, 2003).

**Nell.** Nell had a number of dissertation chairs. One in particular did not read any of Nell's work for two years. When she finally read it, she responded that she did not like it, and she did not want to continue on the committee. Nell, after being abandoned by a number of dissertation committee members who did not value her work, eventually conferred with a more junior advisor. The junior advisor, Nell described, was Black, untenured and female, although she had received her doctorate ten years prior. They initially had a good relationship. This advisor was amenable to interdisciplinary work, taking risks, and experimenting with innovative strategies. The advisor did not have experience directing a dissertation, but she was willing to try. Nell said that the relationship started out well, but eventually the advisor inexplicably "flipped." The advisor accused Nell of stealing her work; she had accused another student of stealing her work as well. The advisor's work was not published, and she did not share her research with the doctoral students, so Nell was perplexed. Nell said:

She just flipped and accused me of stealing her work. Now granted, she didn't have anything published, and as graduate students, we never could quite figure out what her project was, because she couldn't seem to explain it. I was using some Freudian term, that she claimed was hers, and, therefore, my work wasn't original. She ended up just dropping me and writing this letter on letterhead, and copying the graduate studies director to say that she had tried to help me, but apparently I can't do the work of writing a dissertation.

Nell's advisor was untenured. Hawley (1993) writes, "Dependence upon a non-tenured person is risky unless the signs are strong that he or she is to become a permanent member of the

department” (p. 46). Nell’s advisor may have felt the pressure of getting tenure. Part of that process was publishing in a refereed journal. Since their relationship started out well, the researcher can assume that something inexplicable occurred that soured the relationship. Hawley (1993) suggests that being passive and timid in discussions with the dissertation committee does not bode well for graduate students. It did not bode well for Nell in her relationship with the junior advisor. Nell’s strategy for success was not to give up. Her experience was instructive because it illuminated what might happen if the doctoral student were not assertive in her relationship with her committee.

**Audre.** Hawley (1993) asserts that good research should stimulate good debate, and it should challenge “intellectual boundaries” (p. 47). Audre certainly embraced this mantra. Audre’s topic was very benign. She examined a Non-Governmental Organizations’ (NGO) health delivery system to Zimbabwe. She looked at how racial identity was constructed, particularly for African Americans. In addition, she made a connection with Africans in the Diaspora and those in the United States. She described her dissertation chair as a “progressive radical professor.” Audre related that she had open communication with her chair while she developed her research proposal. He never objected to her approach. When she finally submitted the proposal, her chair was enraged. He sent her an email and inexplicably quit her committee. Audre met with him to get some clarity on his reaction. Audre described the encounter:

He said, you think you’re African? You’re not African. Your people weren’t enslaved. The Jews were enslaved. He’s Jewish. He went into this whole tirade about my theorizing about the African Diaspora and that they have mythological relationships with Africa. He lost it. He had an emotional breakdown.

Audre's White male chair exhibited what McIntosh (1988) described as an encounter with White privilege. She theorized that White people were taught not to see themselves as an oppressor who was unfairly advantaged because they were White. Moreover, Whites were not taught that they were participants in a damaged culture.

Audre was assigned another chair. She was a young, White, female. She was not a subject matter expert. Audre was in Public Administration, and her chair, as Audre described her, was a policy person. Audre gave details on the feedback she received on her quantitative chapter. She had solicited the assistance of a statistician to use a unique statistical application. What follows was her chair's response to the chapter:

[My dissertation chair said] 'This is not going to be part of your dissertation'. I said, what do you mean it's not going to be part of my dissertation? I worked with a statistical consultant while I was at the East Coast University to develop this analysis. It was really sophisticated analysis. [My chair says] you didn't explain it properly. I said actually I did; I worked with a consultant. And what she divulged was, she didn't understand the analysis.

According to Audre, instead of the chair asking Audre to coach her on the statistical procedure, (1) she would not admit that she did not understand it; (2) she projected her insecurity onto Audre by telling her she had not adequately explained her statistical analysis; and (3) she exerted her unilateral authority in requiring Audre to remove this statistical chapter because she did not understand it. If the chair were not confident in evaluating the statistical analysis, particularly because Audre worked closely with a consultant, she could have, Audre opined, called the consultant. She neither asked Audre nor the consultant to coach her about a subject that she did not understand. Instead, she exercised her authority. Audre's chair consistently offered

comments like, “stop engaging in political rhetoric” or “this is not scholarship.” Thompson and Louque (2005) wrote that an unwritten rule of the academy is when Blacks “carve out a research agenda that focuses on primarily “black” issues, their Non-Black colleagues are likely to disparage their work” (p. 92).

Audre’s committee had disparate perspectives about Africa and the acceptable role of an African American doctoral student who proposed to research Africa. Committee members quit because they perceived her writing was too political. Others thought an African American scholar should not write about Africa. Audre’s tenure in the program was prolonged, in her opinion, by two years because she had to essentially teach herself a new content area. Audre related:

I learned a completely new research area, developed a whole new content area because I sat there for two years, even coming in with field experience, contacts, and money to work overseas. [My committee told me], we can’t help you.

Audre’s journey was reminiscent of The Black National Anthem, “Lift Every Voice,” which says, in part, “Stony the road we trod/bitter the chastening rod/born in the days when hope unborn had died/yet with a steady beat/have not our weary feet/come to the place for which our fathers died” (Johnson, 2004, p. 794). Earlier African Americans’ journey was not easy, and they frequently endured corporal punishment, but they still pushed forward to the mark of the higher calling. They may have tired on the way, become frustrated and angry, but they continued the journey because they were born during a time when they had little hope. When they reflected on what their ancestors had endured, they knew they had to continue. Audre was told that Africans were of no significance. She was told Africans were never enslaved. She was

told that her writing was too political, but she was undeterred, and she eventually earned her degree. Audre's strategy for success was in her willingness to adjust and regroup.

### **Intellectual Growth**

Hawley (1993) writes that one's dissertation chair needs to be "someone with whom you can communicate, who is knowledgeable in your area, who is politically astute, and who has enough interest in you to see you through the process" (p. 54). As doctoral students progress in their studies, and typically after they are advanced to candidacy, they should have developed "intellectual independence" (p. 56). It was usually viewed as "a sign of intellectual growth" (p. 56). Most graduate students, early in their coursework, were expected to critique theories and question taken-for-granted assumptions. More importantly, they were expected to develop their own academic voices. Some found that their committee did not welcome the intellectual independence that Hawley talked about. In at least one case, the doctoral student may have intimidated select members of the dissertation committee because the student had learned a theory or statistical procedure with which a dissertation committee member may not have been familiar.

**Octavia.** Octavia shared two stories that illuminated experiences that made her strong. One was being self-motivated. The other was her critique of the dissertation committees' resistance to the graduate student's intellectual growth. Doctoral students are expected to be independent (Hawley, 1993). Being independent also means that students should be amenable to adjusting their interests or structuring a program where one does not formally exist. Octavia found that a formal program did not exist when she began her coursework. Octavia shared, "There were no required classes because the faculty couldn't agree on what should be required." Consequently, Octavia had to take several independent study courses that she developed in collaboration with faculty advisors so she could graduate. Octavia related, "I've continued to

move myself along. I was one of the only people who would be willing to push me.” Self-motivation and independence, as in Octavia’s case, were necessary markers of success. In addition to completing the required coursework and developing a research agenda, Black women in doctoral programs are also being introduced to the culture of academia.

Octavia experienced intellectual growth when she had to structure a program to fit her academic needs. She had to harness independence and sound judgment. Octavia may have expected to continue experiencing intellectual growth and independence as she began building her research agenda because that had been her doctoral student experience. Instead, Octavia elucidated incidences when her expectations of the doctoral program converged with the faculty’s expectations (or lack thereof). The convergence, oftentimes, was extremely problematic. Octavia shared:

One thing that I think is really frustrating, about being at the Ph.D. level, is that you only hear a couple of voices and most often they’re not yours. For example, I wanted to incorporate a Black feminist perspective into my dissertation. My research is definitely served by that. But at the same time, I don’t think that they [Octavia’s committee] would understand. My roommate, who just defended her Ph.D., (we have the same advisor) ran into problems because she wanted to read her data, which were interviews on eating disorders, through a feminist perspective. She wanted to write her entire dissertation in a narrative form. The women would be telling their own stories. Our advisor is not familiar with that perspective. It just didn’t go well. Our advisor wanted the most cut and dry, scientific, method with a separate methods section. You have to go through the hoops the way they want you want to. Once

you have shown that you can do it their way and you have the degree, that's your license to do it your own way.

Octavia also hypothesized that some committee members apparently perceived that ignorance was synonymous with ineptness; therefore, rather than learn a new theory, perspective or method, they exerted their authority, so the graduate student did not appear more intelligent, in this area, than they did. Octavia said:

It's amazing, to see how, at this really high level of academia, how limited people are in what they know. And it's so easy [for them] to say, okay, if I don't understand it, then it's not as good as what I know. I just see that as a bunch of academic fear. Why would I [the advisor] not know what this is? Why do I need you [graduate student] to tell me about it, so that you can do it, and I can't rate whether you're doing it right.

Octavia was very candid and insightful. Few, if any, qualitative studies examine the ways that dissertation committees embrace new theories and/or methodologies. How might doctoral programs better serve students by examining this phenomenon? Not only were the study participants refining comprehensive research skills, they also received training in institutional expectations for junior faculty. Young, emerging, scholars were consistently advised to create a research agenda that added to the body of knowledge and made one's analysis unique and different (Hawley, 1993; Jarmon, 2001). For example, when a junior faculty starts the tenure track process, he or she is expected to publish. Jarmon (2001) wrote, "My former dissertation director, who was now my departmental chairperson, mentioned on one or two occasions that I should publish from my dissertation" (p. 176). Graduate students do generally



not know this until someone tells them. Publishers look for cutting edge research; new faculty members benefit by adding publications to their vitae.

**Faith.** Faith, too, demonstrated intellectual growth because she learned how to take a stand for her intellectual voice even though her stand had an adverse consequence. Faith's stand took courage, more importantly, however, it gave Faith the confidence to test the academic waters. This is a tangible skill that emerging scholars will have to develop to survive in the academy. African American graduate students sometimes experienced dissertation advisors who gave credence to White scholarship and vehemently resisted any interjection of Black scholarship. Faith, when assigned an essay on child development theorists, chose a Black male theorist. Her professor gave Faith the choice of receiving a B+ or revising her paper to include a comparison of a mainstream White theorist. Faith declined the offer and accepted the lower grade. Later, when the committee forwarded Faith the questions for the qualifying exams, she was required to compare the Black theorist she used previously to a White mainstream theorist. Faith said:

[The professor] wanted me to compare him [the Black male theorist] to a White mainstream psychologist. I didn't feel that I should have to compare him to a White mainstream psychologist because nobody else in the class, who was doing somebody White, had to compare their psychologist to somebody else. Why can't this [the Black psychologist's] theory stand alone?

A 20<sup>th</sup> century African American female, scholar, Rose Butler Browne, had a similar experience. The researcher illuminates a multifaceted response to difficult committee members by comparing Faith's experience to that of Rose Butler Browne, who earned her Ph.D. in the early twentieth century (Evans, 2007). Browne's research project sought to validate a

Montessori reading methodology to assist remedial readers. Browne worked closely with her dissertation advisor to developing the study groups and the methodology. She worked closely with her advisor in preparing for the oral defense. Browne used statistical analysis in her research proposal. She not only had instruction, through coursework, on the statistical procedure, but she also collaborated with the Psychology department to confirm that the “research design and methodology were sound” (p. 94). Browne’s research proposal was summarily rejected, and her dissertation advisor offered no support. In fact, he said, “I didn’t think she had too much” (Browne, 1969, p. 17). The committee recommended an impossible revision. Browne relates she asked the committee: “Gentlemen, you are saying that to complete their research project, I must build, administer, and totally control a whole school curriculum got the entire period of testing” (p. 19). The committee responded, “One man laughed. “So it would seem Mrs. Browne. Even in our campus laboratory school, the third group would be an impossibility” (p. 19). Browne charged: “The leverage they used to invalidate my work was really quite simple: impose impossible conditions on the research project. Then it might reasonably be assumed that Mrs. Browne, finding stipulated conditions impossible to attain, would quietly and peacefully go away” (Browne, 1969, p. 18). Because Browne was a Rockefeller Fellow who received grant money, she reminded the committee of her having to explain to her benefactors about the impossibility of completing her study because of their recommendations, and they may lose that funding. Eventually, the committee acquiesced, and Browne earned her degree. Black female graduate students may feel inspired to know that Browne rejected the committee’s recommendation. Instead, “She told them that she would proceed with the study as written; if her findings or dissertation did not meet the requirements, they could revisit the matter then”

(Evans, 2007, p. 94). Browne did not back down. She stood her ground and ultimately earned her terminal degree.

The data in this study demonstrate that the majority of dissertation committees do not represent a partnership. The student may be compelled to acquiesce to the desires of the committee members to pass. Doctoral students are expected to conduct comprehensive research, articulate ideas, and make sense of theory. What else might the student learn if dissertation committee members nurtured them? Would the complexity or richness of their understanding be elevated with nurturance and attention? How might others in the academy benefit if the doctoral student were also coached on those skills sets that might bode them well as a junior faculty member? What might happen when a doctoral student is encouraged and allowed to intellectually grow?

All of the women in the study demonstrated persistence. “They continued in a course of action without regard to discouragement, opposition, or previous failure” (“Hitch”, 2005). Harriet tried to exercise intellectual growth. She built a research agenda based on Friere’s (1970) theory of social justice. She continued in the pursuit because her professors confirmed, through their assessment of her classroom assignments that she was proceeding on the right course. As Harriet related, she got “A’s. Nell, in spite of a number of committee chairs who quit, and a junior advisor who accused Nell of stealing her idea, continued on the course. Audre’s White male advisor told her Africans were not enslaved and questioned the veracity of an African American woman doing a research project on Africa. Audre’s White female advisor accused her of engaging in political rhetoric. That same advisor also told her that her work was not scholarship, even though Audre provided evidence from leading scholars. She continued her pursuit. Octavia continued undeterred because she was self-motivated. More importantly,

Octavia's strategy for success was critiquing the dissertation committee's resistance to intellectual growth. Faith embodied intellectual growth by taking a stand not to compromise her analysis on a Black male theorist. Hawley (1993) asserted, "Most profs value precocious, assertive students who exercise reasonable judgment, who know when to stand their ground and when to beat a hasty, but dignified retreat" (p. 27). Harriet, Nell, Audre and Nell experienced very little mentoring or no mentoring at all. Each experienced an unsatisfying, sometimes vitriolic, relationship with one or more of their dissertation committee members. Faith experienced what the committee member may have perceived as coaching. Faith, however, perceived it as intellectual bullying. In the face of opposition, all of the women continued the pursuit.

### **Collaborative Relationships**

Collaborative relationships were supportive, meaningful and collegial. The relationships were partnerships that exhibited open, two-way communication. One strategy Black women used to successfully negotiate the doctoral journey was developing a personal relationship with their dissertation committee chair. The chair was familiar with their work ethic, and more importantly, the quality of their work. Why might this be important? The answer to this question was best illustrated in the life experience of Savannah.

**Savannah.** Savannah had been employed as a research assistant with her dissertation advisor for some time. In addition, Savannah developed connections with other faculty in the department. After Savannah had been working with her committee for a while, her department hired a Black female to join their faculty. The chair of the department, a White man, immediately reassigned Savannah to the new faculty member. Savannah's advisor coached her and advised her to go along with the chair's decision.

To fully understand the significance of Savannah's intrinsic strategy, the reader must understand how her relationship with the Black female advisor began. The Black female advisor requested a meeting with Savannah's committee. She asked to be the co-chair of Savannah's committee. She wanted Savannah to rearrange her spring semester classes to enroll in one of her classes, so she could learn more about Savannah academically. Savannah said:

I was sitting next to my research advisor. She was tapping me under the table just to tell me, 'It's going to be okay. Don't worry about it.' She [her research advisor] tried to negotiate, but this woman was just very odd. She just came in immediately and was like making demands. "If I'm going to take this student on, then this is what she's going to have to do, so I can get to know her better, academically.

Savannah's strategy for success resonated in what occurred under the table. Savannah's advisor tapped her under the table and reassured her that she had her back. She was supportive. She confirmed that she thought the Black female advisor was being unreasonable, but they were a team.

Duckworth-Warner (2003) described the warm and fuzzy mentor as the cheerleader. She provided emotional support. When the graduate students got discouraged, angry, or felt isolated, the warm and fuzzy mentor encouraged, listened, and cajoled. Graduate students who aspire to join the tenure ranks must be amenable to being a team player. Sometimes a graduate student will have demanding and difficult members on the team, but she has to find a way to mediate the differences. More importantly, at times, those in authority make arbitrary decisions that do not make a lot of sense, but as a junior member of the team, the graduate student must find a way to work together.

Savannah's persistence was shown when she shared one of her more contentious exchanges with the Black female advisor. Savannah was seven months pregnant at the time. Her department gave her permission to telecommute and transmit the data she gathered electronically. At the time, she was having a difficult pregnancy. She retained sodium; consequently, her joints and feet were swollen. It was extremely difficult for her to even wear shoes. The Black female advisor called Savannah and demanded that she hand deliver the data to the campus. Savannah recalled:

I dressed in all black, including black socks and black Isotoner slip ons. They were the only things that would cover my feet. When I arrived at her office she looked at me, up and down, closed the door and turned around holding her two index fingers in the form of an "x". She got in my face with her "x" and said 'Women like you are what give the rest of us a bad name...you are the reason we are not taken seriously in the academy...how dare you show up in this building wearing house shoes! Where I come from...where I studied, you'd have a mark on your head...you'd be taboo!).

Savannah did not appreciate her advisor being inconsiderate and demanding, but she tried to be a team player. Shortly after that incident, the Black female advisor went on a campaign to have Savannah terminated from the doctoral program. Savannah said:

She said I was unprofessional. I lacked the skills or commitment or whatever it was. She wrote a very detrimental letter to the chair of the department suggesting that I be put out of the program. They told me that I was on probation pending an investigation into her allegations. My research advisor and everybody had to step in immediately and tell this man, "This is not who she is.

Because of the personal relationship Savannah developed with her dissertation advisor, the advisor was familiar with Savannah's work. When the Black female advisor tried to sabotage Savannah, the dissertation advisor had no problem advocating on Savannah's behalf. Not only did the advisor support Savannah, other faculty members did as well. Savannah said, "She was not aware that I was close friends with the other faculty of color." Savannah spent the time to foster relationships with faculty in her department. As a result, when the storm came, she had reinforcement to assist her in weathering it. Because Savannah listened to her dissertation advisor, was a team player, and fostered relationships with her colleagues, her department supported her. Savannah shared:

I received a letter from the chair saying, "We're sorry. We've had a conversation with the professor. I apologize for putting you with this person. I thought it was this dream match. You're going to be reassigned to your original faculty member. Please don't worry about this. You're out of her class. She's off your committee; all of your requests have been granted.

Glaringly absent from Savannah's description of her initial encounter with the Black female advisor was a personal conversation between the two and a mutual exchange of information. Rather, she described a dictatorial, one-way, communication, one that could not promote mutual respect and collegiality. A relationship cannot mature without honest communication. Communication needs to flow two ways, and existing hierarchies need to be flexible. Hawley (1993) writes, "Mentors, in contrast to advisors, do more than simply point the way. Mentors accompany their protégés throughout the entire process. This called for a professional and emotional investment" (p. 56). Savannah's dissertation advisor supported Savannah and was committed to her success.

**Maya.** Some participants had a partnership with their dissertation committees; Maya was one of them. Meaningful mentorship is important for African American female students' success in graduate programs (Cushinberry, 2003; Duckworth-Warner, 2003; Hopp et al., 2003; Rentz, 2003). Maya described her dissertation advisor as an amazing Black woman who had a lot of mentees. Maya was very purposeful in selecting her committee. Maya described them below:

I told each and every one of them what their purpose is because I don't want them to get confused in this process. My main advisor is a female, who was once a chair of the department, now vice provost. Her purpose is to make sure that I get a tenure track position because she knows the market. The other person, who has given me lots of publishing opportunities, is to introduce me to people in the field. Make sure that I am acquainted. He's my PR person. The last person, the African man, I bounce ideas off of him. He's also a really amazing copy editor when it comes to drafts. So I feel like I have a lot of my bases covered.

Maya used a purposeful selection process and it worked well. Maya's assertive process offered a response to Harriet, whose experience initiated this chapter. Harriet did not have a road map to select appropriate coursework or, more importantly, mentors. If she had been aware of Maya's process, perhaps she would have made different choices.

Mentors model collegiality and academic performance expectations for their students. Maya's strategy for success was possible because her university institutionalized mentoring, and the faculty embraced it. Maya shared that the professors provided the graduates with many unique opportunities. The professors had more publishing opportunities than they could realistically handle; consequently, they routinely gave graduate students an opportunity to



publish by offering them writing assignments. Maya said, “I have a professor who has given me a review that he was supposed to do because he thought that I should probably start publishing.” She went further to say, “Graduate students are given book chapters and opportunities to edit books by faculty. It’s just remarkable the way that they treat us. They really are focused on bridging the gap between student and colleagues.” Maya’s experience is one that could be replicated at other institutions. The mentoring that should routinely happen with graduate students is institutionalized at Maya’s university. Graduate students are not only exposed to publishing opportunities, the faculty cultivates and models a spirit of collaboration with those who will become future junior colleagues.

**Toni.** Toni was another participant who enjoyed a collaborative relationship with her committee. Her advisor was very supportive, including suggesting that Toni apply for a position at her university. Toni followed her advisor to her current university, and she made alliances with key people at her institution that could help her get her dissertation finished in a timely manner. Toni was a trained mathematician. One of the key players on her dissertation committee was the qualitative expert. Toni said:

Another professor on my committee is an exceptional teacher. She helps me with my methodology. I know all the answers. She’s a qualitative methods instructor, and I’m a mathematician. She’s really good at helping me understand how to let the data talk to me. She has great ideas. She has helped me shape my dissertation proposal. And she’s like do this. And everyone’s like “and then what?” And she kept saying no, we can’t say and then yet. Let’s do this first. She has a pretty good understanding of how my mind works, helping me let the theories talk to me,

allowing it to shape the direction that I want to go, instead of trying to always jump to that next step.

Good mentors coach and cheer their students. They guide, instruct, challenge, and cajole (Duckworth-Warner, 2003). During the interview, the researcher noted Toni's enthusiasm with qualitative methods. Toni credited her mentor with creating her enthusiasm. Toni also shared that she was looking forward to working closely with her committee as she completed her dissertation. Toni said, "I love the collaborative nature of research. I'm in that stage where I'm working on my dissertation, but it's the collaborative end of it where I'm doing the work."

Toni's committee members embraced collaboration. They modeled collegiality, Toni and the dissertation committee was instrumental in the success of graduate students such as Toni. The literature confirmed that few African American doctoral students had mentors (Garrett, 2006; Hopp et al., 2003; Peters, 2003; Thompson & Louque, 2005). Research showed that providing mentors is one of the best ways that postsecondary institutions can increase the likelihood that faculty and students of color view institutions as supportive (Collins, 2001; Hopp et al., 2003; Peters, 2003; Thompson & Louque, 2005; Williams, 2001). Mentorship was important for Black women, as well as for all graduate students, to experience success in their doctoral studies.

## **Summary**

As the literature confirms, meaningful mentoring is important to African American females' academic success. Three of the women, Savannah, Maya and Toni, each experienced supportive mentoring relationships with one of more of their dissertation committee members. Savannah's experience illuminated the importance of developing a relationship with members of one's committee. She also highlights the importance of junior members developing networks with other faculty members in the department. When Savannah experienced difficulty with one

of her committee members, but because she took the time to develop personal relationships with the committee members, she received the support she needed to withstand the attack. Her university institutionalized Maya's mentoring and the faculty embraced it. Toni, like Savannah, developed a supportive relationship with members of her committee. Her chair, in fact, counseled her to apply for a job at her university. After Toni accepted the position, her chair continued to counsel her. Each of the respective committees discussed here modeled collegiality, nurturance and compassion and made the doctoral pursuit an easier one for the participants.

## **Discussion**

The women in this study experienced success because they were persistent, and in some cases, had institutional support; most importantly, some of them earned the degree. The others were making consistent progress to complete the requirements for the terminal degree. This study was designed to uncover the strategies these women used to be successful. The analysis prompted a number of questions that the researcher asked during the analysis. What strategies worked for them? What did not work so well? What intrinsic values and/or beliefs did these women embody that gave them the fortitude to keep going? What did they learn and what wisdom could they pass on to the one participant who had not experienced success? Every Black woman who is in a doctoral program could ask these same questions. The importance of having nurturing relationships with faculty cannot be overstated. Savannah had a personal relationship with her committee. Maya had institutional support.

Some of the participants did not experience supportive relationships. Nell and Harriet each illustrated that although they were eventually successfully, their experience was unnecessarily difficult because they did not have a personal connection with their respective teams. Audre experienced what many might perceive as animus from two of her committee

members. The White male advisor vehemently postulated that Africans were never enslaved and her discussion of the Diaspora was mythical. Her White female advisor accused her of engaging in political rhetoric, and she told Audre her work did not represent scholarship. Each of these participants found a way to continue the pursuit.

### **Sisterhood Connections**

Sisterhood connections, for the purposes of this research study, are when Black women supported one another. In addition, the aforementioned connections are displayed when Black women support the research agenda of not only this researcher, but the research of other Black women. Since Black women do not have a lot of cultural capital in their individual programs, it is important that they seize every opportunity to support, cheer, advise and mentor one another. The two stories that follow exhibit sisterhood connections in the form of writing groups.

### **Writing Groups**

**Savannah.** Some participants developed sisterhood connections to as a strategy to keep them on the journey. Savannah and Souljah formed writing groups. Savannah described taking a class with one of the women in her writing group. She went on to say:

We happened to be sharing war stories about dissertating. We realized that each of us had very similar experiences in the program and very similar life experiences. We were all struggling at that moment to get through the program. We started these writing retreats. It was just a bond of sisterhood and commonality that we had to find.

Savannah discerned an opportunity to reach out to two Black women. In their discussion about the dissertation process, they found that they could support one another, and they did not allow a previously missed opportunity to prohibit them from forging a new path. Souljah, on the other hand, took the initiative to start a writing group to ameliorate her feelings of isolation.

**Souljah.** Souljah experienced loneliness and isolation. She grew up on the west coast. She relocated to the east coast for graduate school. Her university's physical setting was not conducive to formulating friendships. Additionally, her campus lacked substantive cultural capital, which further alienated Souljah. She was also learning how to develop a confident academic voice within a white, patriarchal space that resisted the Black female voice. This, too, contributed to Souljah's loneliness and isolation. She seemed to be dogpaddling in the middle of the ocean, and her legs were getting tired. She needed a lifeline. Souljah created an on-line writing group to critique her ideas and writing. She said:

We have an on line writing group. We send out work; we give back critiques, so that's been helpful because they're not in my department. They're all coming from different departments, so they can give me another perspective, and it's just really helpful.

When mentorship and institutional support are not offered, one must develop other ways to get that support. Savannah and Souljah took it upon themselves to create sisterhood bonds, in the form of a writing group. A doctoral student's final product is a comprehensive writing project that is at times disparaged, often with little direction for how to improve the work. If the student can get others to critique her work before presenting it to dissertation committee members, she can test theoretical interpretations and/or applications, not to mention academic writing style. Colleagues can question content area that is unclear and can make editorial suggestions. They can assist the doctoral student in developing a thick skin. More importantly, such collaborative critiques give graduate students opportunities to articulate one another's ideas. All of these assists from others will prepare the graduate student to complete the dissertation and prepare for the defense of the work.

## **Participants' Support For the Researcher**

Sisterhood connections can develop into writing groups for social and academic support. Sisterhood connections also resonated in the participants' support of the researcher and other Black women. For example, Savannah and the researcher had difficulty getting SKYPE to work during the interview. They tried a number of techniques and SKYPE eventually worked. Savannah was the first interview, so technical difficulties made the researcher quite anxious. Savannah, however, was the consummate bridge over troubled waters. She said, I'm going to take the headphones off, so I don't have a double Dr. Reddick. In the African American community, who believed in the Word, should seize every opportunity to share a prophetic word. Savannah was calling those things that were not as if they were (Romans 4:17). The researcher had not earned the degree, but Savannah called it out as if the researcher had. She confirmed that the researcher would survive the boot camp known as the dissertation. Savannah's seemingly innocuous affirmation gave the researcher more support and encouragement than Savannah could ever imagine.

**Dr. Bell.** Dr. Bell, in a very benign manner, offered words of encouragement to the researcher. Dr. Bell said:

Get it done. Just hang in there, and get it done. Everybody cannot do it. I am convinced of that. The fact that you started it and you're at this stage, you'll be done. You'll finish it, and you'll do a good job. You can never have too much education.

Dr. Bell's words had resonance. Similar to the old gospel hymn, "Everybody talkin' 'bout heaven ain't goin'." Everyone who talks about getting a Ph.D. will not get one. At the same time, however, she offered words of encouragement. In essence, she said, "You have come this far; you are almost at the finish line. Do not stop! Finish the journey!"

**Audre.** Audre, conversely, wanted everybody to be successful. Audre said, “I want you all to be successful. I want you to publish. I want us to not just continue to resist, but to create communities where we can thrive.” In the survey responses, a number of respondents talked about the competitiveness of the doctoral journey. Audre, on the other hand, promoted a sisterhood connection, not only in the academy, but also in the Black community.

Audre had a tumultuous doctoral experience. In fact, she described it as painful. In spite of her experience, however, she had the fortitude and compassion to be concerned about other Black women who were enduring the journey. She saw the value in sisterhood connections, and she was insightful enough to discern their importance for an easier journey for others.

**Aaliyah.** Aaliyah provided tangible support. A portion of the conversation is detailed below:

Aaliyah: You have my e-mail and my phone number. If you need any more information or anything, just let me know. I’ll try to be helpful. I know how annoying dissertations can be.

Researcher: Yea, this has actually been fun. I’m having a good time talking to all these different women.

Aaliyah: Oh I would have fun too. I would love to just call people and share similar experiences. There aren’t that many other black women. There’s a couple, but not as many as I would like. Now you’ve made some connections.

Researcher: I have. It’s been a cathartic experience for me.

Aaliyah: Yea, so, we’re out there. We’re in the world.

Researcher: Exactly.

Aaliyah: (Laughing) You just have to look.

Researcher: Yea, my dissertation's going to prove that. We're still here.

Aaliyah: We are. We should make a billboard.

The researcher found Aaliyah's offer of assistance very genuine. She was sincerely interested in the researcher completing the dissertation, so others in the academy could see that Black women did have a presence in the academy. Mabokela and Green (2001), in *Sisters of the Academy: Emergent Black Women Scholars in Higher Education*, modeled for other Black women the sisterhood connection that this researcher encourages. The editors asserted that African American women possessed what they described as "tri-consciousness" (Mabokela & Green, 2001, p. ix): (1) being a Black women in America; (2) being a woman in a male-dominated society, and (3) "inequities within the community of Black scholars" (p. ix). Moreover, they suggest that the fifteen women who shared their stories, in the above-referenced text, can be instructive and cathartic for other Black women. It serves as a model of what Black females in the academy should be doing to support one another.

## **Summary**

Sisterhood connections were illustrated in two ways: writing groups and by supporting Black women. Souljah, who had relocated from the west to the east coast, was experiencing isolation and, what the researcher termed, intellectual intimidation. She was developing her intellectual competence. Because her university's physical plant was not conducive to making sisterhood connections, and Souljah recognized she needed to work on her writing skills, she took the initiative to create an on-line writing group to get that support. Savannah, on the other hand, developed a writing group to get support and keep motivated to complete their dissertation chapters.

## **The Black Female Body**



The Black female body is often objectified in the academy. Moreover, it is often characterized in very stereotypical ways in academic literature. The data from this study suggest that the Black female body must be negotiated and the historical, stereotypical characterization of the Black female body should be understood, so those in the academy can have a better understand how to assist Black women and others how to mediate and transform damaging stereotypes to meaningful relationships.

Understanding the imposition of the Western beauty aesthetic onto Black women could improve African American women's doctoral experiences. There is a fascination and (sometimes) simultaneous repulsion of the Black female body in this country. In 1810, twenty-year-old Saartjie Baartman, also known as the Hottentot Venus, was taken from her native country of South Africa and put on public display in Europe. White men paid exorbitant fees to gaze at her black body (Danquah, 2009). After Baartman's death, her body was mutilated and various parts, namely her buttocks, were properly preserved. She was publicly displayed in a museum in France for 100 years. Like Baartman, Black women's round backsides, full hips, thick lips, and nappy hair still commands an unwanted gaze. White people continue to theorize and objectify the Black, female, body.

Danquah (2009) offered an insightful perspective on the Black body. She asserted that as a native Ghanaian, she was not keenly aware of being "Black" because she was always in predominately Black spaces. When she came to the United States; however, she almost immediately became keenly aware of being Black because she, as Hurston (2004) described almost 100 years prior, did not feel her blackness until she was in White spaces. Hurston, describing the safety and insulation of the Black community, reflected on how she felt in White

spaces after she left the all-Black community of Eatonville. Hurston (2004) wrote, “I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background” (p. 1031).

Danquah described entering classrooms and counting the number of Black bodies. A number of participants had the same experience. It became quickly evident that there was a profound lack of cultural capital in the ivory tower. Many study participants commented that they were either the lone African American in their cohort or one of a few (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Graham, 2003; Johnson, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2005b; Peters, 2003).

Some of the most evocative memories shared by the participants were those in which the Black, female body was objectified. The reader might wonder what the Black, female body has to do with the educational experiences of Black women in academia. The researcher suggests that the objectified gaze, fascination, disdain, and contempt for the Black, female body continues and, at times, inhibits and precludes an authentic relationship with others in the academy, Black and White.

### **The Angry Black Body**

She [the white, female, advisor] said something about having me to rewrite something over. I said, ‘I have to complete this because I really need to remove myself from all white environments’. The White, female, advisor, responded, ‘how do you think that makes white people feel?’ ‘I said you know what? If white people were being threatened with their ability to sustain a job, I’d feel so sorry for you; but that’s not the reality’ (Audre).

Audre’s frustration was interpreted as irrational anger. The angry Black female body stereotype, in part, contributed to how Audre was perceived by her committee. Her assertiveness and passion was received as anger and death threats. Similarly, Barkley-Brown (2008)

illuminates how some in academia projects stereotypical caricatures onto the Black, female body when she writes:

The idea of the dangerous body in academe does have special salience for Black women. This idea is quite often expressed in stereotypical renditions of Black women's bodies. Those renditions might be most pronounced when disagreements arise (p. 221).

Barkley-Brown describes an irrational belief in the stereotypical caricatures of angry Black women, particularly when disagreements occur.

**Octavia.** Few studies explicitly discuss how stereotypical constructions of the angry Black female body prohibit meaningful relationships between some of the participants in this study with their cohorts and committees. The three stories that follow illustrate how some Whites in the academy perceived the stereotypical angry Black female body. Octavia was the only African American in her program. As a teaching assistant (T.A.), she was assigned an office, which she shared, at times, with three or four other T.A.s. One of Octavia's office mates was a White South African woman. Before the White South African woman was assigned to the office, Octavia had posted personal items on the office door and on the office walls. One of the items was a picture of Octavia with two former office mates. One day, the White South African woman, without discussing it with Octavia, removed Octavia's personal items.

A portion of Octavia's exchange with the White South African woman was detailed below to allow the reader to discern the tenor of the conversation and what appeared to be the White South African woman's projection of animus and her own insecurity onto Octavia. The White woman was denoted as "WW".

WW: I took all those things down because I wanted to create a neutral space.

Octavia: Well those things are going back up on the door! Explain what you mean by neutral space.

WW: When I came into the department, I felt like I was intruding on this office clique with you and the other two officemates. You can move my things.

Octavia: I don't want to move your things. It has nothing to do with your things. We're talking about my things and how you moved them without asking me.

WW: I had you pegged since day one. I knew that you would react this way. Do you know what people say when they come to the office?

Octavia: No, what do people say when they come to the office?

WW: They want to know whose things these are and they asked questions.

Octavia: That's why I put them up. When I tell my classes that I'm approachable, and I tell them to come and talk to me; I want them to feel comfortable about it. I want to be consistent. I use my office door and all this other stuff as icebreakers. They can come and talk about whatever it is they want to talk about even if it's not class related.

WW: I guess I want to be more authoritarian.

Octavia: Then do that. It has nothing to do with me.

Octavia did not appreciate her officemate unilaterally removing her personal items without first engaging her in a conversation. In Octavia's opinion, it was tantamount to disrespect. Octavia perceived that her white officemate had obviously harbored animus about their office dynamics for two years. She never talked to Octavia about her feelings; however, she felt comfortable enough with Octavia to ask for copies of her National Science Foundation (NSF) grant. Cohort dynamics in the literature, particularly those that emanated from an

unrealistic perception of Black people are rare. The researcher suggests that the perception, at least in Octavia's case, was unrealistic because the White officemate did not take the time to have a personal conversation with Octavia. She did not know her as a person. Ironically, however, she was willing to engage Octavia in a conversation when the collateral outcome would individually benefit her, like the NSF grant.

Barkley-Brown (2008) illuminated how some in academia project stereotypical caricatures onto the Black, female body. She relates that she met a white, female historian for lunch one day. They had never formally met; however, they had, what Barkley-Brown described as, an "extended and less than pleasant disagreement" (p. 222) several years prior. Upon meeting Barkley-Brown, the White woman said, "You don't look at all like I had expected. I thought you'd be bigger" (p. 222). Barkley-Brown states, "the stereotype of the big angry Black woman is an enduring one" (p. 222).

In Lorde's (2007) essay, "Poetry is not a luxury," she is critiquing women's ability, and need really, to be creative (subjective) and scholarly (objective). Scholars, she espoused, felt compelled to choose between the two. She was suggesting that as an academic community, scholars needed to do both. Lorde wrote:

I believe that women carry within ourselves the possibility for fusion of these two approaches so necessary for survival, and we come closest to this combination in our poetry. I speak of poetry here as a revelatory distillation of experience, not the sterile word play that, too often, the white fathers distorted the word poetry to mean—in order to cover a desperate wish for imagination without insight (p. 37).

Octavia tried to use a creative way to engage visitors to her office space, particularly her students. She said, "I use my office door and all this other stuff as icebreakers. They can come

and talk about whatever it is they want to talk about even if it's not class related." Octavia merged, as Lorde suggested, the objective with the subjective to create a meaningful experience for her students.

The researcher presumes that the White South African woman was objectifying Octavia's Black, female body, because she did not remove the other office mates' personal belongings. In addition, the White woman stated that she expected Octavia to have a visceral response to the removal of her things, projecting the angry, black woman stereotype onto Octavia.

In the researcher's interactions with Octavia, she appeared to be a very gregarious woman. She was open and friendly. In the time the researcher SKYPED with Octavia, she always had a smile. Her responses were punctuated with friendly banter and easy laughter. One could assume that the White woman may have experienced insecurity when in the company of a friendly, outgoing, and confident Black female such as Octavia. To triangulate the researcher's assertion that the White woman objectified Octavia's Black female body, the researcher employed a dialogic lens (Geist Martin & Dreyer, 2001) to examine her and Octavia's conversation. Octavia freely shared academic material with the woman, thereby exhibiting collegiality. Octavia said,

She asked me for copies of my National Science Foundation grant because it was accepted, and I was funded. I gave it to her. She also asked me for advice on doing this methods camp. I gave her advice about that. I've been, what I thought, is a good colleague to her.

Octavia's Black female body was constructed as an angry Black female when she confronts a White female colleague. This stereotypical caricature was propelled on Octavia because she questioned the White woman's motivation for removing her things. The White

woman rationalized her actions by telling Octavia she had her pegged from the start. In other words, the White woman expected Octavia to respond with anger, yet she still removed Octavia's things.

Bonilla-Silva (2003) suggests that Whites experience what he describes as “white *habitus*, a racialized, uninterrupted, socialization process that *conditions* and *creates* whites’ racial taste, perceptions, feelings, emotions, and their views on racial matters” (p. 104). Bonilla-Silva suggests that White *habitus* results from segregation, which isolated Whites from Blacks, and severely limited opportunities for authentic interactions between the two races. Instead of engaging Octavia in a conversation about how she felt and possibly devising a workable solution, the office mate committed what was tantamount to larceny. The hypocrisy was compounded when the same White woman asked Octavia to help her experience success in the academy, which Octavia gladly did. The angry Black female body may also exist between the graduate student and her advisor, as in the case with Audre.

**Audre.** Audre’s dissertation chair socially constructed Audre as an angry and unstable Black woman. After a rather contentious conversation with her advisor, Audre became exasperated and frustrated. Audre’s goal was to complete her dissertation so she could return to her pre-dissertation fellowship on the east coast. The advisor had already rejected her statistical chapter because, in Audre’s opinion, the advisor did not understand the statistical analysis. Audre believed that her committee had unnecessarily protracted her tenure in the doctoral program by at least two years. Audre had scheduled a meeting with her advisor because she believed that her dissertation was complete, and they were merely meeting to schedule the dissertation defense. Instead, the advisor wanted Audre to do more revisions. Audre described the conversation below:

She [the white, female advisor] said something about having me to rewrite something over. I said, I have to complete this because I really need to remove myself from all white environments. The White, female, advisor, responded, ‘how do you think that makes white people feel?’ I said you know what? If white people were being threatened with their ability to sustain a job I’d feel so sorry for you, but that’s not the reality. The reality is I’m constantly attacked in these white environment you know I’m so tired of this; I just feel like exploding. She then accused me of mentioning a gun and threatened to report me.

Black women continued to negotiate their Black female bodies into historically white spaces. Hawley (1993) describes in *Being bright is not enough the unwritten rules of doctoral study*, a Ph.D. candidate who, in the oral defense, was blindsided by a committee member. She reports, “Accustomed to unflagging support, he was astonished when, during his oral defense, one committee member began to attack the appropriateness of a co-variant he was using in his study of business practices” (p. 135). Hawley explains, the Ph.D. candidate was asked to step out of the room. While outside in the hallway, the candidate reflected, “I got mad as hell! I said to myself it was pretty late in the game for this to happen” (p. 135). A committee questioning a theory or hypotheses was typical; but to reserve those concerns until the oral defense can be perceived as disingenuous. Lovitts (2007) suggests that there was not an explicitly articulated standard for assessing dissertations. In fact, little, if any research exists that explicates this phenomenon. What was clear, however, was that the assessment was a private affair among the committee members. In Audre’s case, there was not a consensus between her and the advisor as to the completeness of the work product. This was true of the majority of doctoral candidates.



What made Audre's experience different was when Audre expressed frustration and anger about the lack of consensus, the advisor perceived it as a threat and misconstrued "I just feel like exploding" into Audre had a gun and wanted to shoot all the White people, further confirming the projection of the angry black female stereotype. hooks (1994) describes White women's response to a Black woman's hostility toward White females. hooks surmises that the White women were dismissing how the Black woman's hostility is "rooted in historical relations and contemporary interactions" (101). She further says, "Instead of exploring the reasons such hostility exists, or giving it any legitimacy as an appropriate response to domination or exploitation, they see the Black woman as difficult, problematic, irrational and 'insane' (p. 102).

Audre's advisor was equally responsible for forging a partnership. A partnership presumes that the two parties are capable of embodying empathy and compassion. Hawley (1993) describes the dissertation as the Ph.D. candidate's baby. The candidate knows it intimately. Audre may have been defensive and frustrated because she perceived that all of her hard work was being summarily disparaged.

The researcher looked at how the angry, Black female body was perceived by White and Black women. The researcher also examined how Black men perceived that body. Ella had an off-campus experience with a tenured faculty member at a conference that tainted her academic experience and eventually led to her having to ask for a leave of absence to regroup. Ella attributed her experience, and the resulting fallout, to a lack of institutional academic support by the university, generally, and her department, particularly. Ella stated,

I felt like the department was not very supportive of me. I feel they had a difficult time dealing with students of color and, whatever their particular needs are. I feel like their [the department's] attitude was just sort of, put up or get out, type of thing.

**Ella.** Shortly after the second semester started, Ella and a friend attended a conference on Black intellectuals about an hour's drive from the campus. Members of her university's Africana Studies Department were presenters. Ella explained that she and her companion arrived a little late. Ella said:

At the end of the first panel, we spoke to the female professor. She left to attend the reception because it was breaking for lunch. The male professor waited until the room had sort of emptied out and, then he came across the aisle to talk to us. The first words out of his mouth were 'when I saw you two girls walk in late, *I was thinking, who were these two black bitches*'.

Ella related that she and her friend were stunned. She surmised that from her friend's facial expressions and cool reception, the male professor discerned the error of his greeting. He quickly and awkwardly left the room. Ella and her friend seriously contemplated leaving the conference. They did not understand the professor's unprovoked, inappropriate, and unprofessional remark. After much debate, however, they stayed at the conference. There were a number of panels they wanted to hear that could further their research interests. They encountered the male professor, who offended them that morning, at the evening reception, even though they tried their best to avoid him. Ella described, as she and her friend tried to leave the evening reception, the male professor blocked the doorway and prohibited them from leaving. He initiated a conversation and asked if they were enjoying the conference. Ella responded, "The conference was fine, but your comment this morning was really disturbing; it's something we need to talk about when we get back to campus." Ella said the professor became extremely agitated and apologetic. He apologized several times, but before walking away, he warned them to stay out of the low-income neighborhoods in the area. Ella asserted, "He makes this apology

for an offensive comment, and then on the heels of his apology, he makes another offensive and derogatory comment.”

When Ella and her friend returned to their campus, they filed a formal complaint against the male professor. She related that the complaint process was time consuming and had a detrimental impact on her academic life. The university did not have a formal protocol for graduate students’ complaints against tenured faculty. The researcher asked Ella to describe the administrative complaint process that she had to adhere to.

Ella described:

The two of us were summoned into a closed-door meeting with the Director of Africana Studies. He hadn’t involved anyone from the university. He just handpicked two women he had wanted to attend the meeting. They were not professors that we would have chosen to advocate for us ourselves, so we resisted the meeting with him in his office, and we ended up having a meeting with the Human Resources Department.

Ella explained that graduate students occupied a very precarious position at the university because they were not university employees, but they saw themselves as more than students. They were directed to the Office of Work Force Diversity to file the complaint. The employees in this office handled non-academic complaints. They typically investigated allegations of misconduct by university employees. Ella continued, “We were asked to give verbal and written testimonies of the event. We were also asked to provide a list of potential persons who have had an experience with this particular professor making inappropriate comments.” Ella shared, “We felt it was important to show that this was not an isolated incident, that this had been something that students had been dealing with over a period of two years.” The investigation took four

months to complete. The offender was the graduate adviser in the Africana Studies Department. It took the Africana Studies Department two months to issue a response to the incident. Most surmised that the delayed response was precipitated by an outcry from the community at-large, Africana alumni, and coverage in the local and national news. When Africana Studies finally responded, they acknowledged that the comment was inappropriate and unprofessional and offered that disciplinary action was being taken against the offending professor.

The community at-large and Africana alumni supported the two young women. The story was picked up by the local and national news. Ella, although she reached out to her departmental advisor upon returning to campus, said, “My department was completely unsupportive. I contact my advisor, a white female professor, who is the department’s Africanist specialist. I advised her that I have some university appointments I need to make that conflict with my class schedule.” She responded to Ella two weeks later and the advice she provided, as Ella described, “really was not particularly helpful at all.” Ella was looking for some advice and support. She was a first year graduate student who had filed a complaint against a tenured faculty, one who had connections at the university and who could ostensibly make Ella’s academic journey a difficult one.

Ella described the four-month investigation as perfunctory and incomplete. Ella offered:

They didn’t interview any of our witnesses. It should have been an open and shut case because the professor actually admitted that he made the remarks. He didn’t deny our version of the events. He denied that it was a pattern” So former graduate students, who could have corroborated the offending professor’s pattern of insensitive comments, were never contacted.

The investigators were both university employees. One was trained as a lawyer and the second was a professor, who Ella said, was randomly selected. Ella detailed

We provided scholarly references addressing “why the term ‘black bitches’ is considered to be so derogatory, drawn upon, the black female discourse on the topic going back to Harriet Tubman. It was very easy to come up with a lot of different references if they wanted to do different research into why it was such a hurtful statement to make. They failed to use those resources. They said they used Internet websites, but they couldn’t explain why they chose to use these random Internet websites as sources.

Additionally, Ella said, “the report that they returned to us, after a four-month investigation, was poorly written, poorly researched, and poorly supported.”

This issue polarized the campus. Students were upset because they perceived that the university’s administrators were complicit in the matter because of their protracted response. Ella’s friend was a graduate student in the offending professor’s department. He had direct authority over her. The community, students, and former students, asked university officials to support an open community forum to dialogue about why the statement was particularly offensive to Black women.

The offender claimed that he was using African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Smitherman (1999) asserts that words were never just merely words. Rather, language plays a dominant role in the ways in which it is socially construct reality. The offender claimed he was using African American Vernacular English; however, those who employed AAVE also understood it was governed by a set of rules, the first of which was “being competent in a language means you know who can say what to whom and under what conditions” (Smitherman,

1999, p. 195). The researcher confirmed the local and national coverage of this incident. There were a number of opinion pieces on the matter. Some sided with the two young scholars who were called out of their names. Others, however, exercised what the researcher called a revisioning of American history. They were attempting to divorce the name calling from the historical context that produced it.

Michael Eric Dyson's, *Holler if You Hear Me, Searching for Tupac Shakur* (2001), offered an analysis of the use of the term "bitch," as a misnomer for Black women. Granted, he used it in the context of exploring how it was used in Rap music, but his analysis was instructive here. Dyson asserted that the term had always been used by men to denigrate and malign women generally, and Black women, specifically.

The Black male professor ostensibly embodied power; however, the graduate student embodied a power that might escape most. She challenged a tenured faculty member. She filed a complaint that eventually illuminated an absence in administrative protocol for graduate students. The university did not have an administrative process in place to address Ella's complaint, which might explain the protracted and inadequate investigation process. Ella's complaint garnered local and national news, and as a result, Ella was ostracized on campus, but more specifically, in her department. The mere term "Black bitch" is often aligned with the angry black female body. Even though Ella did not espouse the word, her objection to the use of the word, precipitated an acrimonious response to Ella's objection.

### **Happy to Be Nappy: Black Hair**

I was called into the director's office [of Boys and Girls Town] and told that I needed to change my hairstyle. We're going to need you to change your hair. Apparently, the word had come down from Father Peter, who was the head guy in charge of Girls and Boys Town. My hair didn't fit within the dress code of the campus. I pointed out to them that

the code specifically said that your hair must be your own, and it must be its original color. My head met all of that criterion, so I didn't understand what the problem was (Aamiyah).

The researcher looked specifically at participants who wore natural hairstyles and the visceral response they received from the academy because of it. Black women fought to embrace their hair choices in an institution that mocked, stared, questioned, critiqued, and disparaged it. The stories that follow illuminated how a Black woman's hair choice made her experience in the academy, at times, adversarial. Aamiyah's story described the emotional space Black women negotiated when they transitioned from straightening their hair to going natural. These stories can be instructive in understanding that the Black female body, including the hair, entered into the academy and contributed to how Black women were perceived and treated in the academy.

**Aamiyah.** Aamiyah, whose story is told in greater detail later, described the dominant culture's response to her Sisterlocks. The underlying presumption was that straight hair was the norm. It was not natural, however, for Black women. N. George (2009) described a conversation she had with a Sengalese taxicab driver. He asked her "Where are you from?" George responded, "California." The Sengalese countered, "Your face, your hair, you could be from my country. You'd feel right at home" (p. 64). Black women who wore natural hairstyles engendered an immediate connection to Africa, whether they intended to or not. George said, "My hair juxtaposed with my skin is just different or merely confusion. I don't have to open my mouth. My hair speaks for me, unbidden" (p. 56). The bottom line was that Black women's natural hair made an implicit or explicit political statement. Black hair was political.

Sisterlocks, created by San Diego State University tenured professor, Joanne Cornwell (2009), was a hair technique that “creates tiny braid-like structures in hair, unlike braids, would not have to be taken out as the hair grows” (Cornwell, 2009, p. 94). Aamiyah was told her hair did not comply with the dress code, and she would have to change it. To “change” her hair, Aamiyah would have had to shave her head. She refused to do that. Alternatively, she offered to wear a hair scarf to cover the locks. Initially, Aamiyah reflected, she wore very large African headwraps to demonstrate the absurdity inherent in her employer’s request. As the weather became warmer, however, she wore headscarves. Aamiyah related:

I just became despondent. It was depressing. After a while, I just stopped caring. I just started wearing the black one. I just didn’t even care any more. It just weighs on you. I just started wearing the black one. Nobody else has to do this. It sets me apart when all I’m trying to do is serve these kids and do my job. This draws more attention to me, than if I just had locks.

Aamiyah’s experience resulted in her being isolated and marginalized. The institution’s response to Aamiyah’s hair adversely impacted her internship. She experienced depression and became despondent. She endured the unfair treatment because she understood that “this too shall pass.” It was a difficult period for her, but after she had completed the internship, even though she endured the humiliation of having to cover her natural hair, she earned the terminal degree. As the researcher stated earlier, there is a fascination and curiosity about Black women’s hair. Some white women typically wanted to touch it or asked very invasive questions about it, such as was the case for Nandi.



**Nandi.** Nandi talked about her white cohorts' fascination with her hair. She typically wore her hair in small, individual braids. Nandi sat in a Harlem Renaissance seminar course, while the students discussed colorism and hair. Nandi related:

The question of colorism and hair, especially hair – hair relaxers and things came up during discussions. I became the first who had to answer all the questions because there's so much curiosity about our hair. Outside the classroom, my hair is always that thing. It became a symbol of blackness. I wear braids in my hair, and they always want to touch it. They always want to ask you – do you ever wash it? Do you do this? They don't realize how invasive those questions are. In class, it was not a bad thing because I was able to talk about the clinical nature of our hair.

Nandi exemplified a student who was willing and able to supplement her cohorts' knowledge about Black culture. Nandi offered an explanation to dispel, in part, the traditional stereotypical beliefs about Black people. Nandi could have become defensive about the invasive questions and requests to touch her hair. Instead, she seized the opportunity to supplement her cohort's understanding. There will be times when Black female graduates students will serve in the role of resident expert on the Black culture and experience (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Graham, 2003; Johnson, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2005b; Peters, 2003)

Aamiyah had the Western aesthetic imposed on her; consequently, she became depressed because she was forced to cover her hair. Her experience illuminated White America's compulsion for the Black female body. Not only were Black women told that their hair was unacceptable, they were also inundated with covert and overt messages from the mass media that disparaged the Black woman's hair in implicit and explicit ways. The counternarrative can give

Black female students the agency to think differently about their hair, and the courage to choose a natural hairstyle, if they choose.

**Aaliyah.** Aaliyah offered an extended discussion on her perception of the Western standard of beauty and how her perception evolved. She described how the mass media, with television and billboard ads, illuminated what pretty looked like. Aaliyah said:

You grow up knowing that the way your hair comes out of your head is wrong. You grow up knowing that there's something about you that you have to change. We can't lighten our skin, but we can straighten our hair and be like white people.

As Aaliyah got older, her relationship with her hair evolved. She talked about the inordinate amount of time she had to spend straightening her hair and the money she spent every month to keep up appearances. She decided, while in graduate school, she would go natural. She soon discovered that she loved the new Aaliyah. She shared:

I've just fallen in love. I have never felt more beautiful in my life. When I wake up and I see my Afro, it just gives me the sense of completeness. I don't know if every woman has that same reaction. I was one of those people who wanted long straight hair. I didn't even want people to trim my hair. For me to go from that to like cut it all off, that was a big transition for me. It was a very liberating experience for me.

Aaliyah exemplified the process that Black women must endure to re-define beauty. Moreover, they have to reject how the mass media constructs the Black, female body. Not only do Black women have to respond to and confront the Western aesthetic, at the same time, they have to embrace their authentic selves.

## **Summary**

The Black female body was characterized in the academy, for the purposes of this study, in the angry Black female body and in Black women's hair. The angry Black female is a

stereotypical caricature that has historically plagued Black women. It is also one that Black women in the academy have tried to ameliorate. The caricature is universally applied to Black women in spaces where they would much rather project collegiality. Octavia illustrated a young, Black, female, emerging, scholar who was confident in who she was until her perspective converged with a contentious young, White, female emerging scholar. Octavia's White cohort tried to rationalize removing Octavia's personal belongings, without Octavia's permission and then she told Octavia, she knew she would get mad. Some women may have chosen the path of least resistance and shrunk into invisibility. Octavia, on the other hand, stood her ground. Audre's White female advisor not only accused Audre of threatening her with a gun; she also accused Audre of using political rhetoric and questioned the veracity of Audre's scholarship. Ella experienced the angry Black female body when a Black male tenured faculty called Ella and her friend "Black bitches". Ella embodied her Black female body and filed a formal complaint. Because of Ella's experience, a formal process for graduate students to file administrative complaints that did not exist was developed. Ella embodied an intrinsic strength that she needed because the faculty ostracized her in her department because of the complaint.

Black women were also characterized by their natural hairstyles. Aamiyah, who wore Sisterlocks, experienced the most animus. Her hair was perceived as political. Nandi, who wore individual braids, endured invasive questions and inappropriate touching of her hair. She welcomed it, however, and perceived it as an opportunity to educate her White female cohorts about Black culture. Aaliyah represented transformation. She, like a lot of Black women, straightened her hair for years. When she stopped straightening her hair and wore in naturally, she fell in love with herself. A woman's hair is a part of her identity. How people respond to it can affect how Black women experience the academy.

These women's stories can be instructive for the academy. Diversity is more than mere numbers. It is also accepting and understanding individuals' choices about their personal aesthetics. These stories can be instructive for Black women as well. There were some who had a fascination with natural hairstyles but feared how the natural hairstyle would be received. Perhaps these experiences would give some the courage to embrace their natural hair as a part of their identity. For others, it may serve as a testimony to let them know they are not alone.

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), critiqued, among other things, Black women's fascination and compulsion with the Western standard of beauty. Morrison wrote, "The assertion of racial beauty was not a reaction to the self-mocking, humorous critique of cultural/racial foibles common in all groups, but against the damaging internalization of assumptions of immutable inferiority originating in an outside gaze" (p. 110). Black women were defined by the Western aesthetic: long straight hair, thin frame, and blue eyes. Consequently, Black women continue to re-define that image. Inherent in that image is the Black woman's hair.

## **Discussion**

This research study was guided by three central themes: Educational Experiences, Success, and Afrocentricity. The analysis of these central themes all fell under the overarching theme of the "terminal pursuit." After the qualitative data were coded, three subcategories emerged: Mentorship, including intellectual growth and collaborative relationships; Sisterhood connections, including writing groups and supporting the researcher; and the Black female body, including the angry Black female and Black hair. The researcher will explicate each respective category below.

These women's stories confirmed that mentorship was important to graduate students' success. That is not to say they could not have been successful if they did not have a mentor, and

most of them did not; but they could have had a more meaningful and amicable experience. What the literature did not discuss and what this research study confirms is the dynamics between the participants and their dissertation committees, good or bad. These data add to the body of knowledge. The women, who had collaborative relationships with members of their dissertation committees, also experienced intellectual growth. They gleaned a skill set that could serve them well when they become junior faculty in this nation's universities, like collegiality, intellectual curiosity, and maturity, and in Maya's case, publishing and teaching at the graduate level, as opposed to undergraduate survey courses like what most graduate students experience. Maya described faculty who gave graduate students book chapters and book reviews. Faculty allowed graduate students to teach graduate level coursework. They stayed engaged with their students. Maya experienced success because she had institutional support; however, the institutional support would not have been meaningful had the graduate faculty not embraced it. In other words, university administrators can institutionalize mentoring, but if those who are responsible for administering the mentoring do not authentically embrace it, it will not work.

Toni's advisory team was equally supportive. One member, in particular, serendipitously piqued the curiosity of Toni, the empirical scholar. The advisor engaged Toni in exploring the veracity of qualitative work. It was evident that the advisor worked closely, not only with Toni, but also with others on the dissertation committee on what qualitative work should look like. When Toni and other members of the committee wanted to forge ahead and draw conclusions, the advisor told them it was not time. The advisor counseled and modeled for Toni how to pull back, and as Toni said, "let the data talk to you."

Savannah and Maya exemplified collaborative relationships with their respective committees in very different ways. Savannah's experience was perhaps the most illuminating

because her collaborative relationship with her dissertation committee helped her to withstand an attack on her intellectually and personally by a Black female advisor. Savannah's example detailed the value in collegiality and having a supportive network of faculty. Collaborative relationships, as the research suggests, are important to Black women's success in academe. Maya, on the other hand, illuminated a collaborative relationship that was institutionalized by her university and embraced by graduate faculty.

Maya, Toni and Savannah's stories were invaluable to this study because their experiences were ones that could easily be replicated by those in the university who were truly interested in recruiting and retaining marginalized groups, particularly Black women. For those women who did not have collaborative relationships with members of their committee, they developed alternative ways to get the support they needed.

Sisterhood connections resonated with some of the participants in this study. Sisterhood connections happened when Black women supported one another. Many of the participants did not have meaningful relationships with members of their dissertation committee or other faculty, but they wanted to experience success that resulted from their terminal pursuit, earning the degree, so they reached out to each other. This was so important because Black women do not have cultural capital in the ivory tower. Some of them, like Savannah and Souljah, created writing groups. Savannah's writing group was purposeful; they were all writing their dissertations at the time. The group met daily and read and critiqued each other's chapters. Their writing was scheduled, like going to a class, and it worked well. Souljah, who was still enrolled in coursework, created an on-line writing group. Souljah's purpose was twofold: to work on developing her academic writing voice and style, but also as a social network to mediate

her loneliness. In each case, they saw a need that needed to be met so they could experience success and took the initiative to meet that need.

Sisterhood connections were also evident in the participants' support of the researcher. None of the participants knew the researcher but each of them was one of 102 women who took the time to complete the on-line survey. Each was one of 65 women who agreed to a one-on-one interview. Of the 65 women who agreed to a one-on-one interview, each was one of 19 who took time away from her own academic work, and her friends and family, to spend time assisting the researcher in fulfilling her own academic goals. Not only did they take the time to assist the researcher by participating in the one-on-one interviews, many of them offered encouraging words that motivated and encouraged this researcher to finish the study and complete the requirements for the degree. It is important for Black women in, and faculty who are a part of, doctoral programs to see that sisterhood connections have the potential to implode the stereotypical characterization of the angry Black female body. Moreover, sisterhood connections can provide tangible evidence of confident emerging scholars who demonstrate the value of networking and collegiality.

Equally important were those participants who encountered obstacles in their programs. Many experienced dissertation committee members who were not kind. Ostensibly, many of the committee members were barriers to the participant's success. Nell could not find anyone who supported her interdisciplinary approach. Audre could not find anyone who supported a Diasporic approach. Each of their approaches was not new in academe; however, each may have been new to her respective committees. In Audre's case, however, her approach disrupted reifying White hegemony and the perpetuation of the myth that Africa is the "Dark Continent," unworthy of study. It may have been that the faculty did not keep up with new methodologies

and theories in the discipline. Audre had to endure dissertation committee advisors who wanted to create a re-visioning of American history. Audre was preemptive, however, and she learned a new content area. Sometimes, that is what doctoral students have to do to mediate the gap in knowledge of the old vanguard faculty if they intend to graduate. Octavia, also, was discouraged from using a Black, feminist theoretical framework in her dissertation because her advisor did not understand it, nor did the advisor want to learn it. Octavia was consistently interrogating the exertion of power dynamics inherent in dissertation committee members and the absence of support for the doctoral student's intellectual growth.

Nell and Audre were illustrative of graduate students who did not have meaningful and productive mentoring. They also exemplified women who had not been exposed to the "hidden curriculum" (Hawley, 1993). Each of these women began their doctoral journey with some mentoring that appeared to be supportive; however, each of them, as her tenure in the program was prolonged, experienced no mentoring at all and more vitriol from committee members. Each had to develop a strategy of success to continue on the pursuit. Nell described the process as academic hazing. This research study was the first time she had reflected on and talked about her doctoral experience since she earned the degree. Each of them described her experience as painful. Faculty who served on dissertation committees would be served by reading Audre and Nell's experiences, so they do not replicate what the participants went through or as an opportunity to reflect on what their current relationships are like with their own graduate students.

The Black, female body, which historically has been much maligned and disparaged, offered insight into the sometimes tumultuous and contentious experiences of some of the participants. Octavia's experience with her White, female cohort, Audre's experience with her



various dissertation chairs, and Ella's experience with a dissertation advisor, offered examples of the positionality of faculty and their imposition of intellectual knowledge and exertion of unilateral, and at times, arbitrary power.

The Black, female body was also interpreted as how one chose to wear her hair. Some women who wore their hair in natural hairstyles, like Sisterlocks, were perceived negatively. Perhaps the most evocative demonstration of this phenomenon was Aaniyah who was told to change her Sisterlocks. Nandi's experience with White women wanting to touch her individual braids and ask very invasive questions is typical in the academy and society at large. Nandi, however, used it as an opportunity to educate her cohorts on the Black culture and Black experience.

The women in this study, with one exception, had experienced success. They had persisted in their pursuit of the terminal degree in spite of obstacles and difficulties. Some of the women had to face blatant racism, acrimonious relationships with their dissertation committee members, and discontinuity with their committee, but they continued their journey. In at least three cases, the women had committee members who were very supportive and modeled collegiality. In some instances, the Black women had to take it upon themselves to make sisterhood connections, and support one another.

In the following chapter, the researcher discussed the findings for the final question: Do Afrocentric sensibilities impact African American female doctoral students as they complete their graduate work? And if so, how?

## **Chapter Six: Afrocentricity**

Theory in its simplest terms is the manner by which one thinks about an idea, construct, or issue. Scholars can use Afrocentricity to engage in a discussion about phenomena by and about Black people. University faculty can have authentic and salient discussions about diversity, multiculturalism, and race, by incorporating Afrocentricity as a way to move marginalized groups from the periphery to the center.

At the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, W.E.B. DuBois (1903) opined that the greatest problem facing young America would be that of the color line. The researcher is suggesting that in the infancy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the color line continues to plague this nation. Teasley and Ikard (2010) postulate in “Barack Obama and the Politics of Race: The Myth of Postracism in America”:

The problem with African Americans in terms of racialized thinking is not that they are fixated on race as the central theme in the progression of their humanity and their participation in the American experience. Rather, it is, as W.E.B. DuBois prophesized nearly a century ago, their ‘unforgivable [B]lackness’ that America will not put to rest (p. 423).

Those in the ivory tower can engage in an interdisciplinary, multifaceted approach to dealing with diversity, multiculturalism and race by having an honest discussion about how it affects, impedes, inhibits, and enhances America’s democracy.

As some White Americans proffer what many may call a post-racial discussion, using revisionist history, it does not bode well for the republic. The purpose of the university, in part, is to train those individuals who partake in the sharing of ideas, theories, methods and people, in the knowledge, creativity, and ingenuity to solve problems and develop solutions. One goal of

education, certainly, is to make this country a better place and to engage in meaningful discussions with those in other nations. In 2011, as Americans have witnessed a tsunami that destroyed much of Japan and exposed the entire world to a potential radioactive holocaust, an earthquake that decimated Haiti, tornados and breeches in levies that put the United States on the brink of disaster, honest discussions about diversity and multiculturalism increase the potential for empathetic and creative solutions to disastrous problems. Those in academe can forge a way to illuminate productive ways to assist the community at-large in ameliorating differences and being truly inclusive. Diversity, as bell hooks (2003) suggests, is not easy, and it can be painful, but it must be addressed, and those in the university need to be at the forefront of that effort. Afrocentricity, used as a methodological and theoretical tool, can assist in that effort.

Many who merely hear the term, Afrocentricity, presume that it means the scholar was attempting to elevate Black people and Black scholarship over everything and everyone else. Note that the researcher is not using the word Afrocentricism. Karenga (2002) writes that, “the use of “ism” tends to suggest that it is seen as more of a political posture than a methodology or centeredness of intellectual work” (p. 16). The disparity between Afrocentricity and Afrocentricism was illuminated when Eurocentricism was defined. Karenga writes, “Eurocentricism is an ideology and practice of domination and exclusion based on the fundamental assumption that all relevance and value are centered in European culture and peoples and that all other cultures and peoples are at best marginal and at worse irrelevant” (pp. 16-17). Many scholars, when defining Afrocentricism, simply supplant its name for Eurocentricism. Afrocentricity was not a practice of domination nor did it exclude; rather, it was transparent in its disclosure of centeredness to African agency and phenomena. It invited

critique, interrogation, and rigorous analysis. It assumes that African research subjects need to be active participants in history.

The tenets of Afrocentricity promote social justice, harmony, and reciprocity. Those who are engaged in Afrocentricity are obligated to look back to reclaim history and re-tell it. Educators have to be courageous enough to acknowledge that some theories espoused by scholars in this nation's leading academic institutions propagate racism, division, and essentialism. As one looks back over history, Black people are at the forefront of every major fight. It was principally African American and White youth who propelled the Civil Rights struggle into America's consciousness and forced her to respond. Those in the ivory tower could critically examine how authentically and candidly they engaged in diversity and multiculturalism. Was it an annual conference with speakers who espoused hyperbole and had the temerity to do so without discussing the intersections of race, sex, and class? Did multiculturalism mean appending the traditional syllabus to include a Black scholar, but not talking about race when the text is deconstructed? Did administrators candidly discuss and develop strategies to mediate the significant disparity of Blacks in the tenure track ranks at the university, particularly Black women?

Afrocentricity was developed, in part, as a response to reifying White hegemony. It was purposeful in moving Africana people and scholarship from the margins and periphery to the center. It gave scholars a medium to explore research using an alternative methodology, while simultaneously critiquing traditional methodologies. Afrocentricity's use was typically limited to Africana Studies. In other words, it was not included in traditional university curriculum. Afrocentricity offered the researcher the liberty of embracing Africanist agency. It provided

Black scholars the confidence to read and develop Black scholarship and others in the academy a way to engage with Black scholarship and faculty.

This research study sought to understand Black women's educational experiences in doctoral programs and the strategies Black women used to be successful in doctoral programs. Doctoral students were expected to produce research that was significant and contributed to the body of knowledge (Lovitts, 2007). To that extent, the research was interested in discerning do Afrocentric sensibilities impact African American female doctoral students as they completed their graduate work; and if Afrocentric sensibilities impacted them, how did it impact them? M. Asante (2002) asserts, "Afrocentricity was the conscious process by which a person locates or relocates African phenomena within an African subject content or agency and action. It is therefore location as opposed to dislocation, centeredness as opposed to marginality" (p. 97).

Before analyzing the data, the researcher hypothesized that Afrocentricity was very fluid. It has the potential to move freely from one place to another, independently and, at times, simultaneously. Black people had to make decisions about how to respond to reifying White hegemony, which was often blatantly overt. Sometimes they endured hegemony in silence, at other times, they responded to it directly. Afrocentricity resists being everything to everyone. In fact, it works best when the scholar uses tenets of it that are needed at that particular moment in time. The data will illustrate that some participants believed that they were not Afrocentric; however, when their experiences, particularly their research agenda, praxis or pedagogy, were examined, all of the participants embodied at least one of the tenets of Afrocentricity.

The researcher discovered that the participants' Afrocentric sensibilities resonated in the telling of their stories, not in how they defined Afrocentricity, nor in how they described it. The data also suggested that several participants expressed apprehension, explicit or implied, with the

mere term, Afrocentricity. Three themes emerged when Afrocentricity was coded: confronting reifying White hegemony, Sankofa, and the fluidity of Afrocentricity.

For the purposes of this study, Afrocentric sensibilities are characterized as one who promotes pride in the African heritage, values earning a terminal degree that, in part, uplifts Black people, confronts and challenges reifying White hegemony, challenges deficit theories about Black people, recognizes when they are posited as a resident expert for Black people and seizes opportunities to implode it, conducts research about Black people, values scholarship about Black people and by Black scholars, finds importance in having Black faculty in their departments, and can define Afrocentricity and recognize its importance.

It is important to note here that in order for the researcher to explicate if Afrocentric sensibilities impacted the participants' doctoral experience, the participants had to first define Afrocentricity in their own terms. A vignette that provides how the participant defined Afrocentricity initiates each participant's story. The story, coupled with the researcher's analysis articulates how the each participant embodied Afrocentricity and how it impacted the participant's doctoral experience.

### **Afrocentricity**

The researcher discussed each theme, using an Afrocentric theoretical framework. The Afrocentric framework posited that the researcher was continually asking, "What does it mean to be African?" It also purports to locate African phenomenon and supports and promotes the tenets of Kwanzaa, which are bringing people together, acknowledging the Creator, remembering African ancestors, dedicated to family and the community, and celebrating the fruits of one's labor. The researcher also utilized the Nguzo Zaba or seven principles, detailed below:

- Umoja—harmony

- Kujichagulia—define, name and speak for themselves
- Ujima—build and maintain community
- Ujamaa—concern for the well being, happiness and development of the Black community
- Kuumba – creativity
- Imani - Faith
- Nia—nation building.

### **Reifying White Hegemony**

Reifying White hegemony is defined as positing White culture, values, and beliefs as superior. More importantly, it suggests that it is a closed system, not open to mediation or the possibility of change.

### **Sankofa**

Sankofa is one who looks back to history, claims it, which means they critique how it is constructed and where it is located. For example, does it purport the iconic master narrative? One example of an iconic master narrative is Africans do not have a culture, and therefore, slavery was beneficial because it introduced Africans to Christianity. The most important aspect of Sankofa is re-telling the story. The counternarrative invites the re-telling of the story from a different perspective.

### **Fluidity**

Fluidity suggests that Afrocentricity is complex. It is not dichotomous; sometimes it resides in the gray area. The participants can flow in and out of Afrocentricity, similar to how Black people had to learn how to ‘wear the mask’ (Dunbar, 1895).

### **Analysis**

The researcher explicated the meaning the participants' ascribed to Afrocentricity, through the three themes. Each participant's explication commenced with a vignette of how she described Afrocentricity to the researcher. The researcher weaved analysis through the participant's telling, sometimes in conversation with the experience, sometimes juxtaposed with it. Because it was possible for the participants to be embodied under each theme simultaneously, like Savannah, the themes, too, may be discussed in that manner.

Ten of the nineteen participants' stories were shared in this chapter. The participants in this chapter were purposefully selected to illustrate a representative composite of Afrocentricity.

Savannah initiates the discussion because she embodies all three themes, confronting reifying White hegemony, Sankofa, and fluidity through her teaching philosophy and praxis. Maya, who self reports to be Afrocentric, follows Savannah. Maya is purposeful and conscientious about including Black scholarship in her teaching and research agenda. In addition, she embodies Sankofa by honoring the memory of her grandmother. Souljah embodies Afrocentricity because she confronts reifying White hegemony by merely questioning the ethicality of her White cohort's motivation for doing an ethnography on Black males for whom she had authority over. Aaniyah embodies Afrocentricity by challenging reifying White hegemony in one case by her mere presence and in another by filing a complaint when a White male acts inappropriately. Octavia embodies Afrocentricity by pursuing a research agenda about Black people. Similarly, Toni embodies Afrocentricity by promoting research about Black people. Both Octavia and Toni pay homage to their ancestors, thereby embodying Sankofa. Dr. Bell, the African immigrant who was adamantly opposed to Afrocentricity, exhibited Sankofa by honoring her father. Alice certainly embodies Afrocentricity and illustrates the best possibility to push scholars to find a way to use it to push the most marginalized from the periphery to the



center. Similarly, Nell, who would rather critique Afrocentricity than use it, can assist scholars in trying to enhance greater applicability of Afrocentricity theoretically and methodologically. Ella is included because she came into the doctoral program armed with the tools of Afrocentricity: inquiry, intellectual curiosity, confronting reifying White hegemony, Sankofa, and fluidity. She was nurtured and insulated in Africana Studies. Even with the tools of Afrocentricity, when Ella's Afrocentric beliefs converged with reifying White hegemony in a department that resisted and rejected the tenets of Afrocentricity, coupled with Ella not having the support of faculty, Ella did not have the support to endure the fight alone.

The reader can observe that there are times when the researcher became an active participant during the interview. In an effort to be transparent, but more importantly, to display what might occur during a qualitative interview, the researcher is exposing, what might be perceived as a bias. It is certainly not intentional. Rather, the researcher wants to ensure that participants, who, for example, showed evidence of embodying one or more tenets of Afrocentricity, but saw not value in it, were clear about what it meant. In other cases, where a participant demonstrated an understanding of it, but she did not speak about it in terms of a methodological or theoretical tool, the researcher interjected to solicit the participants' commentary on the possibility of utilizing Afrocentricity in that manner.

The stories were told in no particular order, with the exception of Savannah, whose story commenced the chapter because she embodied all three themes. The remaining participants embodied Afrocentricity through their pedagogy, praxis, research or reflexivity about their ancestors. Of the ten stories that were told here, seven of the ten indicated that they were not Afrocentric, yet all of them embodied at least one tenet of Afrocentricity. The nine participants

whose stories were not told in this chapter had similar experiences to those whose stories were included.

### **Confronting Reifying White Hegemony**

**Souljah.** The researcher did not edit Souljah's response because, again, the researcher wanted the reader to glean Souljah's awkwardness and resistance to the term Afrocentricity.

Souljah said:

When most think of Afrocentricity they think of kind of African centered beliefs and African centered ideology. I guess it kind of depends on the degree. I think...I know some people that are very invested in, you know, in regards, you know, African beliefs in quotes, because lot of people draw from different places so like some people are very focused on Egypt and some people are, you know, Swahili kind of focused and, you know, really depends. But I would generally think of a person that is Afrocentric is someone that kind of either draws from kind of African centered beliefs or even an African centered kind of aesthetic. So I think most people associate aesthetically rather than ideologically even though I think it'd be more precise to think about it ideologically, but, like people think that if you're, you know, natural hair, and you celebrate Kwanza you have a lot of kind of rings with Africa on them, some people might think that was Afrocentric. I think it can be defined in different ways. But for me I think I would truly consider somebody Afrocentric if they believe in an African centered ideology and kind of lived their life accordingly.

Souljah vacillated between defining Afrocentricity aesthetically and ideologically. She saw the value in centering her ideology from an Africanist paradigm. Souljah was in a Sociology program and, during the incident described below, she was enrolled in an Ethnography course. Souljah critiqued the role of Ethnography and the implications of its

application on the Black community. She also repeatedly expressed consternation to the researcher about scholars who exploited marginalized groups for the sake of research. Souljah said:

Qualitative work can be exploitative. [Ethnographers] take from people and do not use their work to benefit them. White social scientists go into these spaces, and they take all of this stuff. They do their analysis and they leave. The work doesn't get back to the people at all. It doesn't help them in any way and I find that very exploitative.

Souljah reflected that two White female cohorts, who were Criminology majors, were trying to conceptualize a potential ethnography project. They vacillated between looking at Black male rappers or drug dealers. Souljah would not assist in exploiting the young Black men who, in her opinion, were in a precarious situation. Ellis (1995) wrote about her dissertation ten years after she completed it. She was compelled to respond because a White male scholar betrayed her. Ellis performed an ethnography in a fishing community. She, at times, not only recorded direct conversations, she also recorded conversations participants had with each other, without their knowledge. She used this unsolicited data in her dissertation. The White male scholar took a copy of Ellis' dissertation back to the community that she studied, and he encouraged them to read it and, in some cases, he read it to them. Ellis (1995) laments:

I did not distinguish between what should and should not be told in my book from the point of view of the Fishneckers. I assumed that because the Fishneckers were 'illiterate,' meaning that many of them did not read or write more than a few words, they would never read my book (p. 72).

Ellis described that her participants were upset about what she wrote about them. She also conceded that she had spent so much time with the community that they no longer considered her a researcher. Consequently, there were conversations she was privy to that the community may not have included her in had she reminded them that she was a researcher.

Souljah had the same ethical concerns with the two White women in her ethnography class. Souljah said:

She wanted to do an ethnography on drug dealers, but it's winter, so she changed her project. She had some type of authoritative role over them. It was weird because these black men were ex-cons who were engaging in drug activity. They were confirming her stereotypes. She would ask me certain things because she wasn't really familiar with hip hop. I was the only black person in the class. She looked at me for confirmation on some things. She really looked to me [because she] needed somebody to help her. They used these slang references in their raps, and she didn't know what it meant. She didn't understand the role or world enough to do an ethnography.

Souljah had the impression that the White women had some type of authoritarian control over the subjects. The relationship begged the question; did the subjects really have a choice in participating? If they elected not to participate, what would be the consequence? Souljah questioning her cohort's motives illuminated reifying White hegemony. Reviere (2001) asserts that one of the tenets, reifying White hegemony, of an Afrocentric belief is "uncovering the hidden, subtle, and racist theories embedded in current methodologies" (p. 712). Ethnographers, at times, are often on a slippery slope. Denzin (1997) writes, "Ethnographers should operate under an ethic of care, solidarity, community, mutuality, and civic transformation. We should

become more like public journalists—committed to the public good, their right to know, and to doing no harm” (quoted in Ellis, 2004, p. 149). Scholars who conducted ethnography should report their findings as if the participants would read what they wrote (Ellis, 1995).

Afrocentricity invited critique. It also compelled the researcher to confront reifying White hegemony. Aaniyah confronted reifying White hegemony by critiquing what was accepted as the norm.

### **Aaniyah.**

It would be looking at things through a framework that was very different from what I’m used to. Everything was channeled through people like Freud, Horton, Kitchener and Jung and those types of old dead white guy scholars. Alice Walker, for instance, wrote on Africana womanism, looking at that as the normal female experience. Let the person define for themselves what is normal, and if that experience happens to be the Black experience or an experience that originated from African values, norms, and principles, readings, guides, and religious experiences, then that works for me. Not necessarily accepting this Western European paradigm as the truth.

Confronting and challenging White hegemony can further isolate and marginalize Black women, not only from their cohorts, but also from professors, who, at times, were the primary contributors. bell hooks (1994) writes, “As the classroom becomes more diverse, teachers are faced with the way the politics of domination are often reproduced in the educational setting” (p. 39). African American female graduates should expect to encounter resistance. Interrupting reifying White hegemony was not easy, but as hooks describes there is “some degree of pain involved in giving up old ways of thinking and knowing and learning new approaches” (p. xx). Aaniyah described an overtly racist university experience, lamenting that one day a professor was telling an Ebonics joke. She said:

A professor made his little Ebonics jokes. This is a professor I've never even had in a class, but he was a reader for the qualifying exam. I was standing in the [department] office one day, and he made some knock-knock type Ebonics joke to the secretary in the department. She didn't get the punch line, which is a little bit funny to me because she kept saying, "What?" and he kept trying to repeat it. And then he turns around, and he sees me standing there, and he walks away.

Aaniyah went further to say that this same professor later developed questions and assessed her qualifying exams, which everyone in her cohort failed. Aaniyah's mere presence interrupted White hegemony.

Aaniyah's Afrocentric sensibilities emerged again when she worked with a White male M.A. student at a mental health clinic. Aaniyah was working on a Ph.D. in Psychology and Counseling. She described that the clinic was open to the public and that the Ph.D. and M.A. students, under supervision, worked with the clinic's clients. In this one case, Aaniyah and the White male worked with a 12-year-old girl who had been raped. The researcher and Aaniyah's conversation was included to allow the reader to glean the gravity of the situation.

Aaniyah: There's a [mental health] clinic on campus for the public. It's actually great. The doctoral interns and the Masters people, under supervision, see people from the public. I worked with a Masters student and a 12-year-old girl who had been sexually abused. His comment to me was 'Look at her. I'd do her, too'.

Researcher: Oh my God!

Aaniyah: I told about that. They got mad at me for telling. There's something weird going on here, where somebody can talk about doing a 12-year-old, who'd been raped. He said some other inappropriate things, too, but a complaint is being

levied against me for not trying to work with this student. I don't want to work with him. He said that he would sleep with an abused 12-year-old. That's...that's bizarre.

Aaniyah confronted reifying White hegemony when she reported the White male's inappropriate comment. Afrocentricity obligated the scholar to be responsible for the well being of the community. It required reciprocity and social justice. More importantly, it required that the scholar embraced the right to describe her reality from her perspective (Reviere, 2001).

Aaniyah stood up for what was right, even when she encountered resistance. Some of the participants rejected the term, but nevertheless showed evidence of being Afrocentric, such as Octavia.

### **Sankofa**

**Maya.** When I identify myself as Afrocentric, I do it with the knowledge that black people in America have been cut off from our roots in Africa. It is merging our understanding of being black American to also being decedents from Africa. I identify it as a resistant to double consciousness. It's the valiant response to being part of this family of people who's descended from Africa.

Maya, who was earning a Ph.D. in English, used literature to reclaim and re-tell the African American experience. Maya described how she accomplished this:

DuBois says he would not take away the African-ness of black people. He believes that black blood has a gift to the world. And I believe that. I believe as scholars, when we come with our personal human experience to whatever department we're going to and whatever task and research we do. It is creating some kind of beauty and some kind of truth. And as DuBois would say, "Some kind of gift to the world."

The experiences we have are going to add to the research that we present to the

world. And if we remember that and remember the people that we represent, then a lot of us would be changed.

In 1920, at a time when Blacks fought for their rightful place in America, DuBois challenged them not to acquiesce to a false imitation of Whites; rather, he argued, Blacks needed to create beauty. Beauty, he said, was simply the truth. The truth, he suggests, was the “highest handmaid of imagination, as the one great vehicle of universal understanding” (p. 782). Maya challenged her students to seek the truth. She also talked about explicating the word nigger in her teaching. She said:

There is one course that I taught for ten weeks, and I promise you that a day did not go by where we did not discuss the word nigger. If I were to explain my teaching style, it would be like a neo-Afrocentricity. In order to go on with our modern day lives and affairs, as black people dealing with subdued racism in America, we have to address verbally, vocally, the histories that we’ve been through. We talk about those things a lot. We talk about the word nigger.

Maya also talked about using James Baldwin’s *Going to Meet the Man* to talk about lynching. She said:

In fact, one of my best classes ever--I call it my panty dropper is a James Baldwin story called *Going to Meet the Man*, where a white man is sexually aroused at the thought of black men being abused. Really. And so the thing that’s so great about that, of course, is that it ties power with race and masculinity. A lot of the choices that I make in my text are demonstrating the need for people to be aware of blackness as a presence in literature--as a beautiful presence.



Maya deliberately and consciously asserted her Black female presence into a historically White patriarchal space—the American literature canon. She challenged taken-for-granted assumptions. A tenet of Afrocentricity is Black scholars' recognizing the importance of reading Black scholarship and interrupting White hegemony. Maya challenged White hegemony with the selection of her course texts and classroom discussions. Not only did Maya embrace Afrocentricity, she also gave homage to her ancestors.

Maya demonstrated Sankofian principles when she looked back and reclaimed her grandmother's story and retold it. Maya shared:

My grandmother received her master's degree, and was ABD back in the '50s. No, it was not the '50s, the '60s, okay. She lived in Texas. She had to drive five hours to go to her classes, because there was only one university in Texas that would allow you to take graduate degrees as a black woman. I have a picture of her up on my bookshelf. I remind myself every day, by that picture she's in her master's degree garb, that if we are supposed to better ourselves throughout our generation, and she received a master's degree, there's nothing more than I can do but to get a Ph.D. There's no other homage that I can give her. There's no other respect that I can give her, but to succeed in this. And then to imagine myself complaining while she was driving five hours to get to her class. If any person of color, who's in a program such as this, remembered the people behind us and the people who are going to come before us, then we will definitely continue through whatever process we've begun.

Maya, as a graduate student, engaged the curiosity of her students by using literature to provide them with the medium and safety to deconstruct a word that has historically been used to degrade, humiliate and disparage Black people. She looked back, reclaimed, and re-told the

story of her ancestors. Both Savannah and Maya used their pedagogical practices to interrupt and critique White hegemony. Souljah, however, used her critical lens as a graduate student to disrupt and critique White hegemony.

**Octavia.** I guess, Afrocentricity would be making the black experience, I guess maybe even be not just the American black experience, but I guess, maybe some kind of universal black experience the center of either your life or your academic focus.

Researcher: Okay. Do you consider yourself Afrocentric?

Octavia: No.

Researcher: No?

Octavia: No.

Researcher: Why?

Octavia: I think in my personal life, I do. But I think with my experiences and not really having grown up around a lot of black people, especially in school, it makes it a whole lot easier to kind of absorb what is the norm. I wouldn't say that I'm Afrocentric, but I'm definitely Afro-aware. I absolutely am Afro-supportive (laugh).

Researcher: (laugh)

Octavia was one who had difficulty embracing the term, Afrocentricity. She was Afro-aware or Afro-supportive, but definitely not Afrocentric. Octavia was a good example of fluidity. Her dissertation topic dealt with researching the sickle cell disease. Octavia described her research as:

It's looking at how people understand genetic screening for sickle cell disease. The literature says, people don't go to be screened because they don't know enough, or people don't go because they have a negative attitude towards it. I found people who

are aware, they know enough to say no and they say no. And they worry about things as they come up.

Octavia pursued a research agenda that engendered a pursuit of communal uplift (Reviere, 2001) and disrupted reifying White hegemony. Sickle cell disease disproportionately affected the Diasporic Black community. Genetic screening was an important component in addressing its impact. Octavia embraced this effort in her research. Black scholars should not be afraid to build research agendas around issues that impacted the Black community. Confronting White hegemony in research agendas was important. Remembering where one came from was equally important.

The Sankofian theme was personified in Octavia's when she discussed her grandmother. She said:

My grandmother, who is now dead, went to Harvard for her masters' degree. She was also in education. The positive reinforcement that she had learned in education, she took back to her job as a deputy warden. She tried to create more of a reform system for inmates. I'm pretty sure that they just put her through hell. I'm sure if they didn't like her before, they certainly didn't like her after she had all this highfaluting education from a place like Harvard.

Octavia looked back and reclaimed her grandmother's story. Octavia, like her grandmother, went to an Ivy League school for her undergraduate studies. Octavia built a research agenda, like her grandmother, which would uplift the community. Octavia's experience illustrated one who embodied Afrocentric fluidity. She, like Savannah, would not embrace the term; however, when her lived experiences were examined, tenets of Afrocentricity were evident. Octavia resonated with the Kwanzaa principle of Umoja because she illustrated

harmony with family, community, and the Diaspora with her research agenda. She embraced, intentionally or not, Ujima, which purports to build and maintain the Black community together; and she embodied Ujamaa, a concern for the well-being, happiness, and development of people. Octavia saw the value in Sankofa, looking back and reclaiming and telling the African story. She certainly represented fluidity in not really understanding how much she embraced Afrocentricity. Toni was another participant who gave homage to her ancestors.

**Toni.** I guess, I would have to say more so than not. My research is centered on the African American population from a source of connection. I have two African American daughters, future generations, pride, carrying on a legacy from my father. So in those ways, I would definitely – I mean I would definitely say yes, more so than not. But it would be something that would be difficult for most to see within me. It's not something that is outwardly part of the way in which I engage with individuals on a regular basis. I think it's just a source of my own motivation and drive in the direction of the things that I do and the population I'm most concerned about serving with my work.

What was so interesting about Toni's definition of Afrocentricity was she espoused an interest in research about Black people and displayed Sankofian principles by giving homage to her father. She expressed an interest in community when she talked about future generations; however, she reduced it all to simply this thing that motivated her. Her deliberate attempt to distance herself from the term was illustrative of her fluidity.

Toni was bi-racial. Her father was Black and her mother White. She said the paternal side of her family expected life long learners. She shared:

My father was born in 1924 in Arkansas. His grandparents were born just before Emancipation. They were given the privilege of education early. My grandfather was

the principal of a Negro school, so he had formal education that was in the late 1800's. Education was expected of my father. I'm third generation with college education. I still am very close to – my father passed away--but my uncle and my aunt are both still living, and I make a point to visit them, to talk to them, to hear the family stories, and to have my children hear the family stories. And the level of pride that they have in me continuing my education

Toni displayed fluidity when examined through the lens of four of the Kwanzaa tenets of ingathering, commemoration, recommitment and celebration. She saw the importance of connecting herself and her children with her paternal family. She demonstrated commemoration by giving homage to her grandfather and acknowledging her ancestors. She showed a recommitment because family was a dedication to the highest cultural ideals in the community. Toni also embraced celebration, which was to recognize the fruits of her labor. Her journey to the Ph.D. was the fruits of her labor.

Toni went on to say, in addition to academic research, she wanted to research and write about her paternal family. The researcher encouraged Toni to write a story about her paternal grandfather. Students in the academy could benefit from knowing what it was like for him to go to school and be a principal of a Negro school in the nineteenth century. Toni responded:

I want to go out there and find other stories, because the thing is that these stories, when you talk to the source, they wouldn't see it as a source of privilege at all. If I had the chance to talk to my grandfather he would have seen all the negatives, all the ways in which he was oppressed and not been able to see the privilege down the line of what his work and commitment meant [to future generations].

One of the benefits of looking back and reclaiming stories in the Black community was it leaves a written record of the Black experience. Just as Toni used her grandfather's story as a source of motivation, others might be motivated by it, as well. One participant in particular, Dr. Bell, reduced Afrocentricity to a buzz word. She saw no value in it; however, she still exhibited tenets of Afrocentricity.

**Dr. Bell.**

When buzzwords are thrown around it really depends on who is saying it and what they are thinking. I've heard that word used in so many different ways that I've never actually looked at it as a real word. I looked at it as a combination of things, depending on who it's coming from. Personally, again, I think people relate to issues depending on their experiences and where they're from and what's going on in their lives at the time. The whole Afrocentric nature of anything, people expect too much. People already have a built up expectation pattern and they expect you to fit in it. And when you don't fit in it they look at you as abnormal. A lot of African Americans don't have any affiliation with Africa. And why should they? They never lived there. They're not from there. They were from there, two hundred or something years ago and then we expect that.

The researcher conversed at length with Dr. Bell about Afrocentricity and its value as a theoretical framework and a methodology in the academy. She was not persuaded. In fact, she was very adamant that she saw no value in it. Dr. Bell's perspective may be influenced because she was an African immigrant. To triangulate this conclusion, the researcher recalled a portion of the interview with Dr. Bell, where Dr. Bell inquired of her husband, what had he expected when he married her. She said, I asked my husband—my husband is African American—'When you asked me to marry you, what were you expecting? At that time, he's never been to Africa. He's watching National Geographic like everybody else and here I am. Dr. Bell's assertion about her

husband watching National Geographic may have confirmed the national media's perpetuation of racist stereotypes of the Dark Continent. In the researcher's conversation with Dr. Bell, it was evident that Dr. Bell did not understand Afrocentricity nor did she want to, but she felt obligated, the researcher presumed, to offer some type analysis about it. The researcher was very present in Dr. Bell's interview because the researcher wanted to ensure that Dr. Bell understood that Afrocentricity was not merely a buzzword, as Dr. Bell had suggested.

Although Dr. Bell did not identify with Afrocentricity, she embodied an Afrocentric sensibility that impacted her doctoral experience—Sankofa. Dr. Bell exhibited the Sankofian principle of looking back and remembering her father. She related:

My parents always told me I was great, so I believed them. My father told me I was intelligent when I was five. He said, 'You're a very smart person. You should be a professor.' I remember it because I took my report card to his office. I gave him my report card. I had all As, and he said, 'Well, well, well. Everybody come here. This is my daughter and look at her report card. She is one of the smartest person's I know. And one of these days she's going to be a professor.' He looked at me, and he said, 'You're a very, very smart person and don't ever forget that.'

Dr. Bell embodied Sankofa. Although Dr. Bell had a very lucrative and successful career in international business, she made a promise to her father to fulfill his prophecy and become a professor. She quit her career and went to graduate school. She is now a professor. Some participants understood Afrocentricity while others saw no value in it. One woman compelled the researcher to be introspective about how race, gender, and class were socially constructed. Alice imploded these labels and illuminated an area that needed to be critiqued and analyzed for

what Afrocentricity can offer to bring her identity and others like her from the margins to the center.

## **Fluidity**

**Savannah.** The researcher asked Savannah, ‘Do you consider yourself Afrocentric?’ The researcher intentionally did not edit the repetitive words or nervous communicator markers, so the reader could get a sense for the difficulty Savannah appeared to experience when she was asked that very benign question. Savannah said:

Yeah. In ways, I’m more the, the, the, the subtle end of what I described, you know, I think. My parents traveled to Africa with us when we were very small children. My mother’s childhood friend married a Ghanaian doctor and became queen mother of his village. My mother owned an import boutique where she sold goods from her travels. I have amber beads and cowrie shells. I have tons of gowns for both me and the kids. In that vein, I view myself as embracing that Afrocentric side. I expose my children. So, culturally, like I said, kind of spiritually, but just in a subtle, you know, my own little way.

Although Savannah defined Afrocentricity aesthetically, when the researcher critiqued her pedagogical practices, evidence of Afrocentricity resonated. Savannah unwittingly seized opportunities to articulate her Afrocentric positionality. This articulation was subtle, as she suggested. It was, sometimes, more important to be clear about one’s location. Savannah taught Introductory Sociology part time. She described a classroom discussion that compared “The Wizard of Oz,” the iconic 1939 movie to “The Wiz,” the 1978 Black version of the iconic film. She said, the class discussion centered on “the difference in our [Black and White] cultures and the hidden messages in the two movies, including, the themes of redemption and freedom from oppression.”



Her teaching objective was unique and the seemingly benign manner in which she introduced difficult issues like race, oppression, and privilege was innovative. She started with a movie familiar to everyone. She helped her students with an innocuous deconstruction of an iconic master narrative: the disenfranchised sojourn to find the omnipotent Wizard to give characters the personal characteristics that they already possessed: a heart, courage, a brain and a home.

Savannah connected to the visual learner by showing clips of the various movie scenes. After they discussed the iconic movie, she compared specific scenes in the original adaptation of “The Wizard of Oz” to the same scenes as they are depicted in the Black version of the movie, “The Wiz.” Before she showed “The Wiz”, Savannah asked her students, “Are there any other versions of the ‘Wizard of Oz?’” A majority of the students responded negatively. When they viewed the black version, “The Wiz,” Savannah described, for example, an older, white, female student’s reaction: “She was just so put off by the images on the screen. Munchkin Land messed her up.” Savannah extended this discussion to make a connection between the subtle, oftentimes racist, manifestations of privilege and domination in our day-to-day lives. She said, “whether its’ a doctoral program or you’re simply talking about a teen’s perspective of sitting in jail, they (white people) just all get this look of fear on their faces; [and say] can we just skip this topic?”

Savannah located her Afrocentric positionality, although she did not articulate it in those terms. She made a conscientious effort to compel her students, at a minimum, to critique the master narrative that was characterized by power, domination, and oppression. Asante (2002) asserts, “the only way to return from the margins of history was to reassert a centered place within one’s own experiences” (p. 110). Savannah returned to a centered place when she deliberately, seemingly innocuously, deconstructed “The Wizard of Oz.”

Savannah's student's response to her Afrocentric pedagogy triangulated her positionality because it illustrated what an interruption of White hegemony looked like. Savannah reflected,

My students oftentimes call me a racist. I do speak primarily from a black/white dichotomy. I use examples of social issues related to race. I teach from a lived experience, so I bring my own stories into the classroom. When I do teach at the college of education, I'm doing it from the perspective of a black mother who has children being raised in suburban schools who are oftentimes the only child of color in a class or, especially, the only black child.

bell hooks (1994) writes, "It is critical that 'whiteness' be studied, understood, discussed—so that everyone learns that affirmation of multiculturalism, and an unbiased inclusive perspective, can and should be present whether or not people of color are present" (p. 43). Savannah used her pedagogical voice and authority to utilize her personal narrative to articulate the African American female experience.

As Savannah demonstrated, Afrocentricity was often evidenced in one's teaching practice. Afrocentricity compelled the educator to disrupt the master narrative by employing the Sankofian principle of looking back to reclaim and re-tell one's story. A scholar who embodies Afrocentric sensibilities exudes African pride, challenges reifying, White hegemony, and offers a counter-narrative to traditional master narratives. Savannah embodied the principles of Sankofa because she turned back to reclaim and re-tell the Africans' story. Savannah's Afrocentric sensibilities are fluid, like raindrops, even though she did not embrace her Afrocentricity in a tangible way. The researcher reminds the reader to recall Savannah's halting and awkward definition of the term, and yet Savannah's pedagogical practices embraced Afrocentricity. The concern she shared for her children being the lone African Americans in their classrooms exuded

Afrocentricity. Her spiritual call to the ancestors at the onset of the researcher's interview with her certainly was Afrocentricity. Savannah exemplified the fluidity of Afrocentricity and the value of knowing its importance in carving out a space for Black people in White spaces. Afrocentricity resonated through Savannah's pedagogical practices. Maya, on the other hand, exhibited a commitment through her teaching philosophy and espoused a commitment to Afrocentricity.

**Alice.**

Well, my understanding of Afrocentricity is like very much, I don't know what you would call it, it's not a theoretical background, but an ideology where you're basically kind of framing your work through this African perspective or very much like, I don't know. It's always hard for me to explain Afrocentricity, but like you're framing your work through this ideology where, you know, the Black race or African culture is very predominant and, I think that Afrocentricity kind of has its own set of, like, values and beliefs, and that most people tend to follow or try to adhere to when they're maybe doing their research or trying to understand certain constructs.

The researcher was not confident that Alice really understood Afrocentricity, so the researcher made additional inquiries, so she could analyze Alice's response with a dialogic lens (Geist Martin & Dryer, 2001). A portion of their lengthy discussion follows:

Researcher: Okay, if I were to tell you to think of it as a theoretical framework that suggests that your research is centered, and you are very transparent in the location of your theory. Would that change your understanding of Afrocentricity?

Alice: I don't know. Maybe in some ways, yes, but in other ways, I think just historically from what I've seen or like certain organizations like the National Association of Black Psychologists. I think about certain psychological theorists, like

Dr. Parhan, and the ways in which he writes about Blackness in psychology, it makes me very uncomfortable. I don't see them at all as being transparent in their understanding of the research that they do. I think they're very much embedded in saying, "This is the be all, end all of Black psychology," and they just, the ideologies are so ancient. They're still stuck in like this Black Nationalist thought that's very patriarchal and misogynistic. My brain is very stuck thinking that that's a lot of what Afrocentricity has been.

Researcher: Now, the scholar that you just named, does he suggest that he's Afrocentric?

Alice: That he's Afrocentric?

Researcher: Uh-huh.

Alice: I don't know. Let me get his book and see if he does, because I'm not sure if he explicitly identifies that way. But when I read him in undergrad, that is automatically what I assumed, which could be my fault. Let's see, okay, let's see what he's talking about. I don't know if he necessarily does. I'm looking in his index. He doesn't explicitly say Afrocentricity anywhere. I would have to look him up online and see if he identifies with that or not.

Researcher: No worries. Just a follow up to that question, when asked if you considered yourself Afrocentric you said that you did not consider yourself Afrocentric because those who fall under that ideology tend to be homophobic. It just sounds like a universal statement. If Afrocentricity is more of what you say in the beginning of that response, that you do research on the Black community and that you

believe in some tenets of Afrocentricity-- what are the tenets of Afrocentricity that you do believe in?

Alice: So, maybe, what's your definition of Afrocentricity? Maybe my definition of Afrocentricity isn't up to par because I don't really study it or haven't really explored it much, so.

Researcher: Afrocentricity, at least the way that I define it in my research, suggests that I am very cognizant of being Black. I'm not trying to make my race invisible. I am centered in my research. In other words, my African American identity is not marginalized; it's not on the periphery; it's right in the center with me. My research interest is one that promotes, uplifts, and interprets phenomenon in the African American community; I'm very transparent about what I'm doing. I am talking about every step that I'm taking within the research, unlike, traditional, patriarchal type of research that most academicians do where they suggest that their biases and prejudices, opinions, beliefs and values do not enter their research. I'm telling you what my values are, what my beliefs are, what my opinions are, but I'm also telling you that I'm continually putting a check on what I'm interpreting to ensure that whatever my beliefs, values, and interpretations are, they do not skew my interpretation of the data. If that all makes sense.

Alice: I mean, yeah, no, and so in that sense, I buy it. I understand where you're coming from because in that sense, and I would say, in certain ways I am, as well, because I'm all about the advancement of Blacks. I'm all about doing research. I mean it's very evident in my research that my race is on the table. But I think where I have a problem is that I can't just only look at my race, right? My experiences as a

Black woman of color differ substantially from a Black straight woman. She may only have to deal with her woman-ness, and her Blackness, whereas I have to deal with my woman-ness, my Blackness, my gender nonconformity, and my queerness. So, yes, my race is right there at the forefront, but it's not alone because my sexuality is right there and the ways in which I view the world as a Black woman who lives within a very patriarchal community--the Black community is very patriarchal--, so dealing with those type of experiences also have a major impact. Aligning myself with a ideology that I feel has been so dominated by men and to a culture that has been very oppressive to women in many ways, I just feel like it's very hard for me to identify with such an ideology when there are still, like, personally for me, like the National Society of Black Psychologists. I've never been to one of their meetings, and I'm very reluctant to because the ways in which the Black community is so embedded within social gender norms and adherent to these social constructions surrounding presentation of gender. Afrocentricity, in its many tenets, are very helpful; it's needed. We definitely need many more researchers who don't lose sight of who they are and where they've come from once they get into their Ph.D. program. But I think my problem is when they forget that you can't only deal with the issues of Blackness. There's so many other issues. You can't sit here and say, "Oh, I'm doing Black issues, so let's not talk about HIV and AIDS because that doesn't happen in the Black community." You can't do that.

Initially, Alice did not articulate an understanding of Afrocentricity. The researcher engaged her in a lengthy discussion on Afrocentricity because her research dealt with HIV and AIDS and young Black men, so she clearly she had an interest in researching the Black

community. Alice was critical of the oppression she perceived was evident in the National Association of Black Psychologists. More importantly, however, Alice brought up a very salient issue—she cannot just talk about race or gender, particularly when gender was framed by heterosexuality. Like Alice said, ‘I have to deal with my woman-ness, my Blackness, my gender nonconformity, and my queerness. So, yes, my race is right there at the forefront, but it's not alone because my sexuality is right there and the ways in which I view the world as a Black woman who lives within a very patriarchal community--the Black community is very patriarchal’.

Alice certainly compelled the researcher to ponder on the veracity of her assertion. Her assertion was one that needs to be explored further. Most of the researcher’s discussion with Alice centered on LGBT issues. As Alice suggested, however, she exhibited tenets of Afrocentricity. She displayed Umoja--a communal interest in the health and harmony of the Black community. She had Kujichagulia (Self Determination). She was determined to define, name and speak for herself and her LGBT community. Alice employed Afrocentricity because she was interested in “uncovering the hidden, subtle, and racist theories embedded in current methodologies” (Reviere, 2001), particularly as it was related to patriarchy and heterosexuality. Initially, Alice rejected the veracity of Afrocentricity, although she did not clearly understand its meaning or application. After conversing with the researcher, Alice saw value in some of the tenets of Afrocentricity. She embodied, however, an aesthetic that rejected the social constructions of race, class and gender, which oftentimes placed her in the margins. Afrocentricity, however, could be used to move LGBT issues from the periphery to the center. Nell, on the other hand, was more interested in critiquing Afrocentricity and its use.

**Nell.**

It responds directly to enlightenment ideologies and puts Africa at the center. It's an epistemological framework that puts Africa at the center. It develops this knowledge base and sense of being that's framed around Africa and what it means to African outside of Africa.

Nell's definition had a framework, but it was like having a window without curtains.

Nell did not see any applicability for the concept in academe. The researcher was interested in engaging Nell in a conversation about Afrocentricity because she taught literature in Africana Studies. A portion of the conversation follows:

Researcher: Do you consider yourself afrocentric?

Nell: No not at all. (laughing)

Researcher: And why not?

Nell: Oh I don't believe in centering. At least not in that sort of way. It seems to be just a reversal of the very problem that got us into social constrictions of race. There are ways in which I think centering can be useful but I don't think that particular route is a useful one.

Researcher: If I were to tell you that Afrocentricity is indeed centering yourself, but it's more about being transparent about the location of your centering. It's a way to respond to traditional methods of research. Afrocentricity is essentially saying that I am locating my Africanness in the center, not in the periphery; we're not on the margins. I'm being transparent about who I am. I'm bringing in my personal life experience into the research process. I am being introspective about my life experiences and how it impacts or influences my interpretation of the data. I'm continually checking my interpretations and my analysis of the data. I'm being



retrospective and self-reflective in my interpretations. The over arching theme of Afrocentricity is that I am continually seeking justice, truth, and reciprocity. I am at the center of constructing a knowledge base that responds to the community that I'm researching, and that community is who validates my findings and not the ivory tower. If you thought about Afrocentricity in those terms, would that change the way you think about Afrocentricity?

Nell: No I'd still say that I'm not Afrocentric.

Researcher: (laughing)

Nell: And it's been quite a while since I've read Asante's Afrocentricity, but I mean I did have to read it for my methodology, or no, for my, intro to the discipline class, and I had lots of issues with it then, just ideologically but then also with like issues. I guess I'm more invested in deconstructing notions of community, of questioning ideas about justice and truth. So no it wouldn't--I would still definitely be outside of that paradigm. And I also don't consider this idea of like, African or Africanness or something? I don't identify that way.

Researcher: Okay.

Nell: Which isn't necessarily that fun being in a black studies program but, (laughing).

Nell was interesting because she embraced an interdisciplinary approach that Africana Studies offered, and she saw the veracity of using a post structuralist framework. Kincheloe and MacLaren (2005) asserted, "A critical theory reconceptualized by post structuralism (...) promotes a politics of difference that refuses to pathologize or exoticize the Other" (p. 314). In explaining tensions in her department, Nell said:

There's a big investment in essentialists notions of blackness and community and connections to Africa, than my kind of post modern and post structuralist training and just my own sense of who I am and where I fit into this world, are so, so much in opposition to.

The essence of Afrocentricity, by its very nature, opposed essentialism. That was not to say that there may be individuals that essentialized their approach to Afrocentricity, which should not be confused with Black Nationalism, but Nell was not persuaded. Although Nell was critical of Afrocentricity, her research agenda included Black people and the Diaspora. Ella, on the other hand, was trained in Afrocentricity and its application. She embodied what happens when a Black woman embodied Afrocentricity converged with White hegemony and did not have the tools to withstand a acrimonious response to it.

**Ella.** Ella was one of a few participants who provided a comprehensive definition of Afrocentricity, and her understanding of it was demonstrated in the examples that she had provided. Consequently, the researcher asked how Afrocentricity could be used to assist Black women to successfully complete their doctoral studies. Her response follows:

That's a good question. In my experience I think having black female professors or some sort of mentorship available would have been really helpful. I mean there's some people who considered themselves to be Afrocentric but might not address that in their research. The specific area that I'm interested in is very much based upon identity and culture and the unique intersection of black people in the western hemisphere and the cross currents between the western hemisphere and West Africa. There are a lot of unique challenges when you're a black female student. I wasn't as prepared to be so dismissed by professors that were not of color. It would have been

helpful to me earlier on to be given an idea of what to expect when you're a person of color that oftentimes if you bring in that perspective into the classroom you'll be met with at best some confrontation, but at worst you'll be ignored.

Ella earned a M.A. in Africana Studies. She was trained to question, interrogate, and critique White hegemony. She went to a department, Anthropology, that as she described it, did not invite her critique. Ella related:

There's two different ways in which anthropology is taught. The more classical tradition, you deal mostly with who's considered the founding fathers of anthropology. It has very racist undertones to the Other tends to be very derogatory. And then there's activist Anthropology which was formed as a critique of traditional anthropology in the sixties or seventies. My department focused on the classical treatment of the word. So I felt as if they were confronting some very sensitive subject matter without, critically analyzing the way third world peoples were being categorized and classified because anthropologists like to think of themselves as scientists. So their classification systems tended to in my mind, use racist paradigms. So the first semester was somewhat of an adjustment, having come from an Africana department where critique was such a big part of the training. My personal opinions about the work were met with a lot of acceptance. I think there was a tendency to view my perspective as combative [in Anthropology] whereas I felt it was important to challenge the paradigms we were working with and not just accept them as canon.

Ella's experience illustrated what happened when an Afrocentric graduate student converged with reifying White hegemony. Reviere (2001) states, "They must uncover the hidden, subtle, and racist theories embedded in current methodologies;" and they must "maintain

inquiry rooted in a strict interpretation of place” (p. 712). Ella attempted to exercise her academic agency and disrupt racist theories by merely asking that they be critiqued. Because of her assertiveness and location, she was marginalized. Some might even describe her experience as ostracism. Ella said, “When I raised questions in class, they were never addressed to the point that other students in the course were asking me why the professor never answered my questions.”

When an Afrocentric perspective was embraced, there could be collateral consequences, such as in Ella’s case. When she had an adversarial incident with a tenured faculty in another department, her department provided her with no support, coupled with being perceived as combative because she critiqued the traditional notions of anthropological systems of classification and categorization, the researcher presumed that it had something to do, at least in part, with Ella’s Afrocentric sensibilities.

## **Discussion**

The researcher confirmed that few participants understood or were aware of Afrocentricity. Most of them either described it in purely aesthetic terms or they confused it with Afrocentricism, often using the terms interchangeably. Few of them recognized it as a theoretical framework or viable methodology. All of them exhibited at least one tenet of Afrocentricity, intentionally or not.

Afrocentricity is interested in moving Black people from the margins to the center. It moved them from being the subjects of study to being active agents who are engaged in the research. Their activism is evident in their research agendas. Those research agendas could include issues, policies, phenomenon that directly affects Black people. Inherent in Afrocentricity is social justice, harmony, and reciprocity. It compells the researcher to employ the Sankofian principle of looking back to recall history, reclaim it, and re-tell it. It is interested

in the good of the community and the well being of the community's inhabitants. The participants in this study all exhibited these qualities.

Although Afrocentricity was developed over ten years ago, it has not been embraced in departments outside of Africana Studies. Most of the participants had not been introduced to Afrocentricity prior to this research study. It makes one wonder what might be produced if emerging Black scholars had a methodological or theoretical tool that could assist them in uncovering untold stories by and about Black people.

Those participants who clearly embodied Afrocentric sensibilities had a difficult journey, whether they embraced it or not. Savannah's students resisted her pedagogical approach. They often called her racist. Maya, on the other hand, had a similar approach; however, she had the institutional support to proffer her praxis. Maya's journey is one that university personnel should seek to replicate. Aaniyah had an unnecessarily difficult journey. Her objections to a White male colleague's inappropriate comment about a 12-year old rape victim appear to be reasonable. Aaniyah was vilified for complaining. Ella entered her doctoral studies with the tools to use Afrocentricity. In order for Afrocentricity to have applicability, however, it has to be supported, at some point. Department faculty attacked Ella, and a Black male faculty in another department attacked her as well. When she sought support in her department and the academic community at-large, she received no support. It became mentally debilitating and Ella eventually had to take a leave of absence from the acrimony of the campus. Ella's experience is reifying White hegemony personified and offers the most compelling rationale for scholars to use a multifaceted approach to imploding and confronting hegemony.

The data on Afrocentricity adds to the body of knowledge. Few scholars use Afrocentricity as a theoretical framework or a methodology. As this study has shown, there is

value in recovering untold stories by and about Black people. There is still much to be told and written about. Black people are still in the periphery. If there is any hope of moving from the margins, as CORIBE (King, 2005) suggests, Black people have to lead the charge.

Afrocentricity is one way to accomplish it.

## **Chapter Seven: Summary, Discussion and Recommendations**

The final chapter of this dissertation summarizes the educational experiences of Black women in doctoral programs, discusses the strategies Black women used to be successful in their doctoral programs and explicates how Afrocentric sensibilities impacted Black women's experiences in their graduate programs. The major sections of this chapter summarize the methodologies, findings, implications for future research, and the limitations of this study.

It is important to understand the schooling experiences of African American females in order to identify environmental factors that might be mediated to ensure their success. Moreover, Afrocentricity can offer Black women a tool to challenge reifying White hegemony, utilize Sankofian principles of looking back, reclaiming their history and re-telling it, and it offers the freedom and liberty of the fluid nature that Afrocentricity offers.

This study used a mixed methods methodology to explicate Black women's educational experiences, strategies for success, and Afrocentric sensibilities. One hundred and two Black women completed an on-line survey, eighteen women participated in a one-on-one interview, and one woman provided a written response to the interview protocol via email. Each one-on-one interview lasted approximately one hour.

### **Quantitative Data**

The quantitative results conformed to the four primary issues that resonated in the literature. More than 60% of the respondents had, what they described as, a good, nurturing, and supportive relationship with their mentors. Some of their comments included, "She's fantastic, always available." "my intellectual mother," "respectful," "simply amazing," "I have an excellent relationship with my mentor." One respondent wrote, "They were nurturing, honest,

and supportive.” The literature purports that few Black women had supportive mentors during their doctoral studies, although mentoring is important to Black women’s success in graduate



programs. Most of the women (69%) reported taking at least one class that was taught by Black faculty. This finding is also contrary to what the literature suggests.

This research study sought to understand what Black women experienced in the classroom. Three subcategories emerged: experiences directly attributed to race, being the resident expert, and their relationships with their classmates. Over 50% of the women had at least one experience that they could directly attribute to their race. Twenty percent of them attributed this experience to insensitivity. When asked to describe their experience, some of their comments included, “There’s not enough room in this box to contain the answer to this question.” “I got use to being referred to as an “at-risk” student.” “My colleagues were concerned that I was “too intense” and too much about race. My body language seemed hostile. An African American woman student warned me that it didn’t pay to be “too black.”

Similarly, over 50% of the participants were perceived as a resident expert on the Black experience or culture by the faculty and/or their cohorts. Thirty percent of the respondents expected that they would have to serve in that role in the classroom. Some of their narrative responses included, “In a conversation about public assistance, all eyes turned to me as if I had personal knowledge on the issue.” “All persons who are not of the dominant group are thought to be experts for that group.” “Does that really need an explanation?!” “White, male, professor wanted me to address white students’ questions and anger about how they felt, not wanting to be called racist.”

Half of the women reported having a good relationship with their classmates. Some of their comments included, “My cohort was amazing.” “Very close, excellent support, biggest support system, no competition.” “It was a fantastic union of brilliant people.”

Sixty-three percent of the respondents reported that they were Afrocentric. Twenty-seven percent of them could define Afrocentricity; however, none of them described it as a theory or a methodology. Those who could define Afrocentricity either specifically named Asante (2002), the scholar responsible for developing the theory, or a tenet of Afrocentricity, such as African pride, spirituality, community, or the value of having a research agenda that supported the Black community. Some of their comments included, “Afrocentricity is when you place black experience, culture, and people at the center of all decision[s] you make.” “Connecting to African ancestry and instilling a pride, a passion that uplifts and connects with all people.” “Placing one's African characteristics and values at the center of one's beliefs, existence, or view point.” “I would define it as when an individual places their African heritage or culture at the center of the everyday lives and activities.” “Worldview/practice/academic standpoint popularized by M. Asante, characterized by its focus on the African (psychological/cultural/spiritual) referent that is said to join/link/ground black people worldwide.” None of them described it as a way to move marginalized people out of the periphery and into the center.

### **Qualitative Data**

Those women who were successful in their respective programs experienced success because they did not give up until the mission was accomplished. Of the nineteen women who participated in the one-on-one interviews, seven of them had earned the degree. Four were All But Dissertation, and the remaining eight were still completing coursework. One of the participants had taken a leave of absence, but she indicated that she had every intention of returning, perhaps not to her university of record.

Savannah related, “I define success because I have a degree hanging on a wall behind me, so I have accomplished my mission.” Nell, also, equated success with earning the degree. Nell

shared that in spite of a search committee who did not take her seriously because she was a mother, she persevered and completed the degree. Dr. Bell, after working in the corporate world for a number of years and experiencing material success, went back to school to earn the terminal degree. Dr. Bell experienced success because, as she said, “with the doctorate program, I think success would be completing the dissertation.” Aaniyah earned a degree in Psychology and Counseling, and she had to demonstrate proficiency in both disciplines. She described a number of blatantly racist experiences in her doctoral studies. When asked if she were successful, she answered affirmatively. She went further to say, “If there were outcome measures, they [the programs] met their outcomes in teaching these things to me. So [I was] successful because I am actually still alive.” For some, tangible evidence of the degree constituted success. For others, the continual pursuit towards earning the degree spelled success for them.

A number of participants equated success to persistence. Persistence was the ability to persevere with tenacious determination and purpose. Persistence was one who did not give up, in spite of challenges, obstacles, set backs, and defeats. The majority of the participants ascribed their success to persistence. Faith experienced the loss of a child, being on bed rest twice when she was pregnant with her two sons, an impending divorce, and the death of an advisor. She said, “Success is that none of those things have stopped me from doing the program. People have come and gone; and I’m still here. I’m still making my way through it.” Souljah, who grew up on the west coast, entered the Ph.D. program right out of undergraduate studies, and relocated to the east coast. She talked about the loneliness and isolation she experienced at times being away from family and friends. She talked about the process of developing a confident academic voice within a white, patriarchal, space that resisted the Black female voice. She

defined success as “I’m still in the program and have maintained my sanity.” Because of Octavia’s research interest, her school did not have a formal, structured program, so she had to design her own program. Octavia recalled inquiring about a list of the core courses she needed to take for her degree. She shared, “there were no required classes because the faculty couldn’t agree on what should be required.” Consequently, Octavia had to take a lot of independent study courses that she developed in collaboration with faculty advisors so she could graduate. Octavia related, “I’ve continued to move myself along. I was one of the only people who would be willing to push me.” One must be self-motivated and independent to be successful in Octavia’s case. In addition to completing the required coursework and developing a research agenda, Black women in doctoral programs were also being introduced to the culture of academia.

A number of participants experienced a meaningful and enjoyable doctoral experience because of the institutional support they had received. Most of the support was manifested in terms of advisory organizations, and more importantly, tangible graduate faculty support. Typically, Black female students were either the lone Black in classes, or one of a few. The advisory organizations gave marginalized students a forum to meet and discuss various issues in an environment where they had some level of cultural capital. Not only did they discuss theoretical concepts and research agendas, but they also discussed difficulties they perceived with particular faculty members. The advisory organizations invited various faculty members to their meetings to discuss research, graduate school, or other relevant topics.

Maya, for example, talked about a multicultural organization that her college funded and the faculty supported. The organization engaged in discussions on multicultural and diversity issues. In addition, Maya shared that the faculty provided tangible support for the graduate students by providing them with publishing opportunities. She said, “My professor [gave] me a

review that he was supposed to do because he thought that I should start publishing.” She went further to say, “graduate students are given book chapters and opportunities to edit books by faculty. It’s just remarkable the way they treat us.” For Maya, she was successful because the graduate faculty provided meaningful and authentic mentoring, and they exposed her to tenure-track expectations, like the importance of publishing.

Toni received a lot of academic support. She was exposed to a ground breaking research project as an undergraduate. Serving on the research team piqued her intellectual curiosity about using data to respond to questions she had about pedagogy, more specifically how to reach struggling students. Because of her undergraduate experience, she received support from a woman who also served on the undergraduate research team, and who is now her dissertation advisor and a very supportive mentor. Toni related success to being on schedule to finish on time. She says, “I’m on schedule to finish on time, so that’s success.” Toni was on time, in large part, because of the institutional support she received.

The educational experiences of these participants were captured under three categories: Mentoring, Sisterhood Connections and The Black Female Body. The researcher expounded upon each category and the subcategories inherent therein. Research studies (Collins, 2001; Hopp, Mumford, & Williams, 2003; Peters, 2003; Thompson & Louque, 2005; Williams, 2001) confirmed that mentoring was important to the success of Black female students. It also showed, however, that few students experienced authentic mentoring in their doctoral studies. Some of the participants did not experience supportive relationships in their respective programs. Harriet said, “I wasn’t getting mentored which I know now is supposed to happen.” Nell said, “I was using some Freudian term, that she [her Black female advisor] claimed was hers, and therefore my work wasn’t original. She ended up just dropping me and writing this letter on letterhead,

and copying the graduate studies director to say that she had tried to help me, but apparently I can't do the work of writing a dissertation.” Audre had, what the researcher described as, one of the more contentious relationships with her mentors, Audre said:

He said, you think you're African? You're not African. Your people weren't enslaved. The Jews were enslaved. He's Jewish. He went into this whole tirade about my theorizing about the African Diaspora and that they have mythological relationships with Africa. He lost it. He had an emotional breakdown.

Some of the participants questioned their ability to truly experience intellectual agency. They had few opportunities to display intellectual growth. What they experienced, on the other hand, was what they perceived as committee members exerting power and agency over them, sometimes in arbitrary and what they perceived as unreasonable ways. For example, when Audre used a sophisticated statistical procedure, her dissertation chair, who Audre opined, did not understand it, made her remove the chapter from her dissertation, rather than become familiar with it. Octavia wanted to utilize a Black feminist theoretical framework, which is not new to the academy, but her dissertation chair was opposed to it because she was not familiar with it. Octavia said, “Our advisor is not familiar with that perspective. It just didn't go well. Our advisor wanted the most cut and dry, scientific, method with a separate methods section.” Nell could not find a faculty member who was willing to support her interdisciplinary approach, so she had to revise her topic to something more general and generic. As Octavia related, the participants had to learn how to “jump through the hoops” to please their respective committee members in order to earn the degree. Most of the literature suggests that doctoral students are expected to add to the body of knowledge (Hawley, 1993; Lovitts, 2007), but this was not always the case.

## **Collaborative Relationships**

Three, Savannah, Maya, and Toni, out of 19 women experienced a supportive relationship with their dissertation committee. Two others, Audre and Nell's, relationships with their dissertation chairs started off well, but ended badly. Maya's relationship was institutionalized, but what was important, was the faculty embraced it. They exposed Maya to the hidden curriculum of academia (Allen, 1995; Duckworth–Warner, 2003; Hinton-Johnson, 2003). They gave her publishing opportunities while in the program. They extended teaching opportunities at the graduate level. They made a conscious and concerted effort to prepare her to become a junior faculty upon graduation. Maya exercised intellectual agency and independence. She was given the opportunity to develop and illuminate her academic voice. Similarly, Toni was provided substantive support from her dissertation team. In fact, she described her team as collaborative. Her team gave her the support and encouragement needed to develop expertise in qualitative research, even though her niche was in quantitative data. One advisor, in particular, counseled, cajoled, encouraged, and supported her in that effort. Her advisors exhibited the importance of Toni being a well-rounded student and being academically prepared to perform each methodologically approach with competence and confidence. Savannah's dissertation team exemplified the value of graduate students developing collegial relationships not only with their respective teams but also with others in their departments. There were times when some advisors recommended that participants be terminated from the programs, as in Savannah's case, but because Savannah had taken the time to network and develop relationships, faculty in her department knew her, and they willingly supported her. When collaborative relationships did not exist or the participants needed more than those relationships could or were able to offer, some of the participants developed sisterhood connections.

## **Sisterhood Connections**

When women in this study did not have purposeful mentoring or little, if any, institutional support, they found ways to build Sisterhood connections. Sisterhood connections happened when Black women supported one another. Two ways that they accomplished this was by developing writing groups and supporting the research agenda of other Black women, particularly this researcher.

Black women connected and supported one another by creating writing groups. Savannah, for example, was at the dissertation stage. She formed a writing group with two Black women. They met daily, and they read and critiqued each other's chapters. Savannah shared, "We were all struggling at that moment to get through the program. We started these writing retreats. It was just a bond of sisterhood and commonality that we had to find." Souljah, on the other hand, created an on-line writing group to develop and improve her academic writing style and to socialize with other Black graduate students. Souljah said, "We send out work; we give back critiques, so that's been helpful because they're not in my department."

Sisterhood connections were also manifested in Black women supporting one another's research agendas, particularly this researcher. Not only did the nineteen women take time out of their lives to assist this researcher, they also offered words of encouragement. Savannah said, "I'm going to take the headphones off, so I don't have a double Dr. Reddick." Dr. Bell shared, "Get it done. Just hang in there, and get it done. Everybody cannot do it. I am convinced of that." Aaliyah said, "You have my e-mail and my phone number. If you need any more information or anything, just let me know. I'll try to be helpful. I know how annoying dissertations can be." Another theme that resonated in the educational experiences of Black



women in this study was the Black female body. It was manifested in two ways: the angry Black female body and Black hair.

### **The Black Female Body**

The angry Black female body was a personification of the angry Black female caricature that has promulgated in academic and popular literature for decades. This perception of Black women was embraced by the participants' classmates and by faculty. Octavia, for example, was perceived as angry and unreasonable because she asked her White female officemate not to remove her personal belongings from the office door without talking to her. The White woman told Octavia, "I had you pegged since day one. I knew that you would react this way." Audre's White female chair, on the other hand, accused her of wanting to shoot her White dissertation committee members because in Audre's frustration of wanting to complete the dissertation and her chair wanting more revisions, Audre said, "I'm so tired of this; I just feel like exploding. She then accused me of mentioning a gun and threatened to report me." Ella provided an example of a Black male faculty member who projected the angry Black female caricature on Ella and a friend at a professional conference. The Black male said to Ella and her friend, "I saw you two girls walk in late, I was thinking, who were these two black bitches." The angry Black female body were environmental factors that Black women had to mediate in order to be successful in their respective programs. Negotiating with the Western aesthetic, particularly Black hair, had to mediated, as well.

Black women's hair is political. There are those in the academy who have particular perceptions of Black women who chose to wear their hair in natural hairstyles, specifically Sisterlocks. Aamiyah had one of the most evocative experiences in that regard. She was asked to change her hair because it did not conform to the dress code. In order for Aamiyah to comply

with that request, she would have had to shave her hair. Sisterlocks are individual braid like hair patterns. Aamiyah could not simply take them out, like braids. Consequently, in order to comply, Aamiyah offered to cover her hair with headwraps or scarves. Aamiyah chose Sisterlocks because of the liberty it offered her in managing her hair. Instead, she was forced into oppressive conformity that did not take into consideration the complexity or difference in Black hair. Forced to wear scarves, resulted in Aamiyah experiencing depression. She said, “I just became despondent. It was depressing. After a while, I just stopped caring. I just started wearing the black one. I just didn’t even care any more. It just weighs on you.” Black hair was another environmental factor Black women who chose to wear natural hairstyles had to contend with to be successful in their doctoral studies.

### **Afrocentricity**

Eleven of the 19 participants self-reported as being Afrocentric. Few of them, however, could define Afrocentricity. Savannah defined Afrocentricity, in part, as “I have amber beads and cowrie shells. I have tons of gowns for both me and the kids. In that vein, I view myself as embracing that Afrocentric side.” Maya defined it as, “It is merging our understanding of being black American to also being decedents from Africa.” Dr. Bell defined it as a buzzword. She said, “When buzzwords are thrown around it really depends on who is saying it and what they are thinking. I’ve heard that word used in so many different ways that I’ve never actually looked at it as a real word.”

Initially, the researcher tried to reach a consensus with each participant on what Afrocentricity meant to them. Next, the researcher explicated if Afrocentric sensibilities impacted the participants’ doctoral studies. The ten stories that were shared in this study, six of the participants did not consider themselves Afrocentric. Octavia said she was “Afro-aware” or

Afro-supportive, but not Afrocentric. Toni shared, “It’s not something that is outwardly part of the way in which I engage with individuals on a regular basis.”

There were three central Afrocentric themes: Confronting Reifying White Hegemony, Sankofa, and fluidity. Six of the ten participants embodied more than one theme simultaneously. Savannah embodied all three. The remaining four embodied at least one of the tenets.

Afrocentricity positively impacted the participants individually, except, perhaps Ella, who experienced, what could be described as an acrimonious response to Afrocentricity. Ella said:

It would have been helpful to me earlier on to be given an idea of what to expect when you’re a person of color that oftentimes if you bring in that perspective into the classroom you’ll be met with at best some confrontation, but at worst you’ll be ignored.

Each participant embodied a tenet of Afrocentricity, even those participants who resisted, and in some cases, rejected the term. The participants supported a research agenda that supported the Black community. Half of them embodied Sankofa. They saw value in honoring their ancestors by looking back, reclaiming, and re-telling their stories. More importantly, those who shared their ancestral stories used those stories as motivation to continue their doctoral studies. Each of them acknowledged that their ancestors’ journeys were more arduous than theirs; therefore, they had no reason to quit their respective pursuits.

## **Discussion**

**Success.** The quantitative data support and the qualitative data confirm that Black women experienced success in doctoral programs because they were persistent and they did not give up until they earned the degree. This study also confirmed that Black women endured blatantly racist experiences in the classroom, and Black women were often looked upon as a resident expert of the Black culture and/or experience. This research supports the existing data on this matter.

**Mentorship.** The literature confirms that mentoring is important for Black women to experience success in their doctoral studies. Duckworth-Warner (2003) describes three types of mentors: the VIP, the How-to and the Warm and Fuzzy. This research study illuminates the abstract nature of those descriptions. In other words, Duckworth-Warner maps out what mentorship should look like. This research study illuminates that there was not a consensus of what a mentor meant. At times, participants used dissertation chair, graduate advisor, and mentor interchangeably, therein lies the problem. If a graduate student expects a mentor to expose them to the hidden curriculum of the academy, expects them to counsel, cajole and direct her to earn the terminal degree, but the mentor is a graduate advisor, for example, whose job is to advise the student on the coursework required to complete the program, there is a disconnection in expectations.

This research study is important because it illustrates two types of mentorship that can be instructive to administrators who direct doctoral programs and faculty who work with graduate students in the academy who are interested in recruiting and retaining Black female students in doctoral programs: institutional and collaborative mentorship. Maya's experience best illustrates the ideal mentoring experience because it was institutionalized by the university and the graduate faculty embraced it and ensured its success. The faculty worked closely with graduate students. They gave graduate students meaningful and beneficial assignments that would assist students in their future endeavors. Savannah and Toni illustrate a collaborative mentorship that confirms the three types of mentors that Duckworth-Warner describes. They exposed the graduate students to the hidden curriculum. Mentors instructed, cheered, encouraged, and motivated their students. If Savannah's mentor had not assisted her in navigating the contentious relationship with the Black female advisor, it could have been a politically career ending experience for Savannah.

On the other hand, Toni's mentor ensured that she was competent in, not only the quantitative data that she had extensive experience with, but also that Toni was competent in qualitative analysis.

The most compelling story on the importance of authentic mentorship for the success of Black women in doctoral programs is that of Ella, the one participant who reported that she had not experienced any success. Ella did not receive any mentoring in her doctoral program.

Rather, she experienced isolation, bordering on ostracism and invisibility. Ella said:

In my experience, I think having black female professors or some sort of mentorship available would have been really helpful. There are a lot of unique challenges when you're a black female student. I wasn't as prepared to be so dismissed by professors that were not of color. It would have been helpful to me earlier on to be given an idea of what to expect when you're a person of color that oftentimes if you bring in that perspective into the classroom you'll be met with at best some confrontation, but at worst you'll be ignored.

Although Ella was one of a few of the participants in this study who had specific training in Afrocentricity, she was the least prepared when confronting White hegemony. She was trained and insulated within the safe confines of Africana Studies. Ella's historical understanding of hegemony illustrated an esoteric application, evidenced by her comment, ". I wasn't as prepared to be so dismissed by professors that were not of color." Ella's youthfulness may have contributed to her expectation that the academy would accommodate her intellectual freedom and diversity. When Ella's Afrocentric training converged with reifying White hegemony in a department that was historically conservative and espoused racist ideologies, Ella was not prepared to respond to the vitriol, even though she had tools at her disposal. Mentorship is

important in ensuring the success of Black women in doctoral programs. Equally important is the exposure of all students, but particularly Black students, to Black scholarship and Black faculty.

**Black scholarship and faculty.** The literature purports that graduate students experienced limited exposure to Black scholarship and Black faculty in their doctoral studies. Less than 10% of university faculty is Black; therefore, it seems reasonable that students would have that experience. The quantitative in this study, however, does not align with the existing literature. Forty-nine percent of the participants reported reading and/or discussing Black scholarship. In addition, 75% of the respondents reported taking a class with Black faculty. The researcher found, however, when interviewing the nineteen participants, when specifically asked about the Black scholarship they had read in their coursework, several participants could not distinguish whether they had read it in their undergraduate or doctoral programs. In addition, many of them conceded that the courses in which Black scholarship was included was typically not a part of their core classes, but rather, elective courses that they had taken outside of their departments.

**Classroom experiences.** The participants in this study confirmed that Black women were subjected to racially insensitive incidences in the classroom. They were expected to respond to racial stereotypes about Black people. For example, one participant described a classmate purporting that the majority of Black people were on welfare. The participants were not at all surprised about these assertions, but they were concerned that university faculty, for the most part, did not challenge or critique these assertions in the classroom. The participants confirm that Black women experience culturally insensitive comments in the classroom from faculty and cohorts (Garrett, 2006).

**African American community's response.** The participants confirmed that the African American community supported their pursuit of the terminal degree. As the literature review concludes, even though they supported the participants' efforts, they did not always understand what was required to earn it. Maya implies that her intellectual ambition contributed to the demise of her marriage. A number of participants, Souljah, Nandi and Aaniyah, talked specifically about family members inquiring about their marriage and dating prospects because of their ambition. Although this is not included in the data analysis, it is a concern the participants expressed, and it is certainly an area that warrants additional investigation.

A number of participants discussed the community at-large expressing pride in the participants' efforts in pursuing the degree. Aaniyah shared that she went to a grocery store and a mother saw that she was a Ph.D. The mother introduced her teenage daughter to Aaniyah, even though they were strangers, to illustrate to her daughter what was possible for her. Souljah's family reminded her of the unique opportunity she had to earn the degree that would put her in an elite academic community. They reminded her of her opportunity every time Souljah became weary or felt homesick. The African American community did not understand the technicality of the process, but they understood its importance.

**Afrocentricity.** One common thread in the lives of the participants of this study is their embodiment of Afrocentric sensibilities, whether implicitly or explicitly embraced, these women used it to motivate them to continue on the journey. Afrocentricity, moving from the periphery to the center, is not a new phenomenon. In fact, one can see evidence of Afrocentricity in the lives of Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, Ida B. Wells, David Walker and others. The concept of Afrocentricity is not new. Asante developed it over twenty years ago. Its use, however, is almost exclusively found in Africana Studies. The women in this study, with a few

exceptions, had not heard of the term. All of them had an opinion of what it meant, however, few of them had engaged in an intellectual debate about the veracity of its use as a theoretical or methodological concept in academe.

The women in this study confronted reifying White hegemony in their doctoral pursuit, sometimes merely by their physical presence. Others of them, like Audre, tried to have a reasonable, intellectual response. When Audre proposed to research a rather benign topic—a NGO in Africa’s health delivery system, and she was told Africa was of no significance, and her committee would not support her research, she taught herself a new content area. When she was told she was not African, Africans were not enslaved, and the Diaspora is a myth, Audre was undeterred; she called on the spirits of the ancestors to assist her in her fight. Her tenure in her program was prolonged, the fight was tumultuous and contentious at times, but she did not give up.

The veracity of Sankofa, looking back, recalling the past, reclaiming and re-telling it, resonated in the lives of these participants. When the women were not bound by the researcher’s formulaic interview protocol, when they conversed with the researcher like sister-friends, the spirit of Sankofa was illuminated. Even participants who found no value in Afrocentricity, like Dr. Bell, still called on Sankofa to reclaim the promise she made to her deceased father. It was her promise that compelled her to leave a lucrative career and return to graduate school to earn a Ph.D.

Several of the participants embodied the fluidity inherent in Afrocentricity. They could embody one or more tenets of Afrocentricity simultaneously. The value of Afrocentricity is its complexity. Like the air, you cannot restrict it to one box because it will not be contained. It resists being compartmentalized. Imagine being outside a circle of scholars who are



pontificating about Africa being the ‘Dark Continent’ and her inhabitants and descendants being void of culture, values, beliefs, mores and traditions, espousing a master narrative that purported that Africans contributed nothing of value to the world’s civilization other than mindless, brutes, in the form of slave labor. Afrocentricity suggests that an Afrocentric scholar is obligated to move from the periphery of that circle by carving a path, a space, to allow for that movement. Afrocentric scholars are obligated to implode that master narrative by offering a counternarrative that informs and educates those scholars about Africans’ contributions, like the Ancient African Empires of Ghana, Mali and Songhay. Africans contributions to domesticating farm animals, developing medicine and mathematics, as we know it, and a system of trial by jury.

### **New Body of Knowledge**

This research study is premised on the tenets of Afrocentricity: illumination not invisibility, the center not the margin, embracing challenges not acquiescing, but, more importantly, embodying social justice, harmony and reciprocity. Although a gradation of racism is difficult, if not impossible, to measure, this study certainly illuminates that generally the women who embody multiple Afrocentric tenets endured greater opposition in their studies.

Many participants experienced unreasonable and inexplicable ire from Black female advisors. The literature suggests that Black students at PWIs seek the few Black faculty on campus for support and advice; consequently, Black faculty are disproportionately burdened by trying to meet the needs of all the Black students. This study, however, illuminated Black female advisors who may have resented that responsibility.

When Savannah’s Black female advisor told her that her attire was inappropriate, and she did not represent Black women well, she made it personal. It is reasonable to speculate that the advisor may have felt the need to exhibit intellectual agency in front of her White colleagues. The Harlem Renaissance, one of the most prolific periods of creative cultural expression for

Black people, was precipitated on the notion that Black people needed to proffer a narrative to substantiate their ability to articulate theories and ideas of the intelligentsia. This period is marked, at times, by hyperbolic rhetoric that competed with the contemporary White theorists of the time. Similarly, Savannah's advisor exhibits her need to substantiate her presence in the academy.

The heart of this study is found in the dialogue that occurred after the formulaic questions were asked and answered. The formulaic questions asked the participants to describe their classroom experiences. When the researcher gave the participants the liberty to converse on issues that were important to them, their experiences added to the body of knowledge. The participants contributed data that were not previously explored in any depth in previous studies. They illuminated the dynamics inherent in their relationships with their dissertation committee members, particularly the chairs of their respective committees.

Few, if any, studies explore the discordant relationship between Black female graduate students and Black female dissertation committee members. Some of the participants in this study presumed that Black female advisors are in a better position to empathize with the insensitivity they had experienced in the academy. Black female graduate students lacked cultural capital in the university, and they frequently felt ostracized by their cohorts and by faculty. Instead, some of the Black female advisors described in this study were unsupportive. They endured personal attacks that can be directly attributed to their race. One participant was accused of stealing her advisor's work. In two instances, the Black female advisor advocated for the Black female student's termination from the doctoral program. One participant who did not have a Black female advisor, but she found value in having one. She felt a Black female advisor could provide support and help her navigate through some very difficult times. These findings

cannot be generalized to a larger population; however, they are noteworthy, and they are significant enough to warrant additional study.

One of the participants in this study likened the doctoral process to hazing four years after she earned the degree. The recollection was still very painful for her to talk about. Hazing, which is often characterized as the process by which individuals with authority compel the initiates to perform demeaning tasks, is generally an emotionally painful one for the initiates. The authoritarians exert influence to produce a homogenous group of initiates. Initiates exercise no creativity or agency. Doctoral students are encouraged to develop a research agenda and add to the body of knowledge. This hazing practice, however, prohibits doctoral students from fulfilling this goal.

Few research studies have examined the veracity of using Afrocentricity as a methodological or theoretical tool in academe. Afrocentricity compels scholars to give homage to Africa (return to the source and reclaim the story), and articulate it (re-tell the story). Afrocentricity is premised on a belief in harmony, social justice and reciprocity. It obliges the researcher to critique and respond to White hegemony. It is a valuable tool and can be useful in the academy.

Few studies have surveyed 102 African American women about their educational experiences in doctoral program, and few studies have interviewed 19 Black women about those experiences. This study specifically addressed Black women's relationships with their dissertation committees. It also offers insight into what authentic mentoring means in the lives of Black women.

### **Implications for the Future**

There are a number of trajectories resulting from this study; four of them immediately resonate for the researcher. One question that needs further explication is what tools can

emerging Black female scholars, who embody Afrocentric sensibilities, use when their embodiment converges with reifying White hegemony? How can the academy be more supportive and inclusive to those who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT)? What happens when a Black female scholar takes tenets of Afrocentricity and uses those elements that are meaningful, rather than rejecting it in its entirety? How can administrators and graduate faculty model programs that are institutionalized and embraced by faculty?

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## **Appendix A**

### **Email**

Date

Name

Email Address

Subject:        Participation in a Research Study: “Lifting as We Climb: African American Women’s Educational Experiences in Doctoral Programs”

Greetings:

You are being contacted because you have graduated from, or are currently enrolled in, a Ph.D. or Ed.D. program. Bonnie Reddick, a San Diego State University-C Claremont Graduate University Ph.D. doctoral candidate, is conducting a research study to examine African American women’s educational experiences in doctoral programs. You are being asked to complete an on-line questionnaire, consisting of 32 questions, along with demographic information.

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The on-line questionnaire will be posted on SurveyMonkey, or a similar service, for 30 days or until the desired sample size of 100 is obtained. Incentives to participate will include a raffle to win 1 of the 5 selected gifts, as follows: 1) \$200.00 VISA gift card, 2) \$100.00 VISA gift card, 3) \$50.00 Barnes and Noble gift card; 4) two \$25.00 Starbucks gift cards. When the

survey response is completed, the researcher will mail the respondent one raffle ticket. Once the researcher has received 100 surveys and all raffle tickets have been mailed to the respondents, the researcher will conduct the raffle. The raffle drawing will be videotaped and posted on the researcher's Facebook account. Each respondent will be provided the Facebook information and each will be invited to view the drawing. After the drawing, the 5 gifts will be mailed to the respective respondent.

In addition, I am also soliciting your participation in a one-on-one interview and a webcam focus group discussion which will give you an opportunity to elaborate on your survey responses. The focus group discussion will assist me in learning more about African American women's educational experiences in doctoral programs.

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You will be asked to select a pseudonym. Your institutional affiliation and residential locales will not be revealed to insure your anonymity.

Contact information:

Bonnie Reddick

136 West Douglas Avenue

El Cajon, CA 92020

Email: [redzbenz@cox.net](mailto:redzbenz@cox.net)

(619) 261-3686

**Appendix B****Questionnaire**

What year did you start your doctoral program? \_\_\_\_\_

1. What is your current status?  
☐ Ph.D. /Ed.D. student currently enrolled in coursework  
☐ Ph.D. /Ed.D. student advanced to candidacy and working  
on dissertation  
☐ Completed program \_\_\_\_\_ (Year)
2. Please check the appropriate box. I earned a(n) \_\_\_\_\_.  
☐ Ph.D.  
☐ Ed.D.
3. If you have not graduated, what year do you expect to graduate? \_\_\_\_\_
4. Please check the appropriate box. My age is :  
☐ 20 -30  
☐ 31-40  
☐ 41-50  
☐ 51-60  
☐ Over 60
5. Please check the appropriate box.  
☐ I attend(ed) a Predominately White Institution (PWI).  
☐ I attend(ed) a Historically Black College or University (HBCU).
6. My B.A. is in \_\_\_\_\_

7. My M.A. is in \_\_\_\_\_

8. Tell me about yourself (i.e. family background, hobbies, interests, community involvement).

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10. Why did you enroll in a Ph.D. or Ed.D. program?

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11. How do you racially identify yourself? Please explain why.

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12. Have you (or did you) experience success in your doctoral studies?

Yes ( ) No ( )

13. If yes, please explain.

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14. Have you ever had an experience that you could directly attribute to your race during your doctoral studies? Yes ( ) No ( )

15. If yes, tell me about that experience.

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16. How many Black scholars did you read about and/or discuss in your program?

- ( ) 0
- ( ) 1-2
- ( ) 3-4
- ( ) 5 or more

17. Were you ever viewed as the “resident expert” on the Black experience/Black culture during a classroom discussion? Yes ( ) No ( )

18. If yes, please tell me about that experience.

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19. Tell me about your relationship with your classmates.

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20. Please define Afrocentricity.

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21. Do you consider yourself Afrocentric? Yes ( ) No ( )

22. Please give me two examples that best demonstrate your understanding of Afrocentricity.

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23. Did you have a mentor in your program? Yes ( ) No ( )

24. Tell me about your mentor (race, sex, department, research interests).

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25. Tell me about your relationship with your mentor.

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26. How many Black faculty members does your department have?

- ( ) 0
- ( ) 1-2
- ( ) 3-4
- ( ) 5 or more



27. How many courses did you take that were taught by Black faculty?

- a. 0
- b. 1-2
- c. 3-4
- d. 5 or more

28. My immediate family and/or community support my doctoral studies.

Yes ( ) No ( )

29. My immediate family and/or community understand my doctoral studies.

Yes ( ) No ( )

30. Tell me about your research interests and future plans for your research.

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31. I would like to conduct one-on-one interviews and focus group discussions using webcams.

Would you be interested in participating? Yes ( ) No ( )

32. I do not have a webcam, but I am interested in sharing my experience in a one-on-one interview with the researcher. Yes ( ) No ( )

My contact information is as follows:

My name is: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone No. \_\_\_\_\_